

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

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JAN.



TEN FICTION BULL'S EYES!
FEATURE NOVEL

• BLAZE A WILD TRAIL TO HELL

by L.L. FOREMAN
TWO NOVELETTES

• GUN-BLUFF BUYS A SHALLOW GRAVE

by JAMES SHAFFER

• WEAR MY BULLET BRAND!

by ROBERT L.
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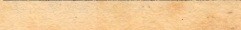
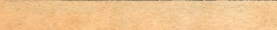
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Record Wrangling

By ARIZONA
BLAKE

HOWDY, tophands. Here's the latest wax-whirlers news for you straight off the old spinner and we hope you've been joining in because—

EVERYBODY'S DOING IT.

We're speaking of two trends that have been taking the country by storm—cowboy songs hitting the top of Tin Pan Alley popularity lists, and square dancing. We'll tie into these two developments in order.

First—the sky-high popularity of folk and Western music. Most of us have been fans of real range and hill music, the kind that folks out on the plains and mountains of this grand country get together and warble or yodel in real community style, for just about as long as we've been living. We were brought up on this music; it was part and parcel of our lives.

Tuneful and sincere, this music grew out of the kind of living many of us did, and belongs to the people who plowed our fields, made corn likker, or rode our ranges with nothing but a horse for company for weeks on end. The cowboy, for example,

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A black and white line drawing of a group of men in suits and hats. The man in the center foreground is wearing a fedora and holding a telescope. Other men are visible behind him, some wearing hats and some with glasses.

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BLAZE A WILD

Dirk Keeler and Andy Hogan were a dangerous twosome and an unbeatable pair as long as they rode together, but when their trails separated it was every man for himself—pulling his own hell-afire irons or hauling his own dead-weight freight.



He tottered on, against tearing lead—and Nita hung onto him, sobbing.

CHAPTER

Hell and Horses

1

The horses traveled with less vigor after the night's hard run. But they were good horses, a large band led by a brown mare who seemed to know that back north to Arizona was the destination. She kicked up the Mexican dust pretty briskly, and she wasn't worrying about the line of armed horsemen trailing along some distance behind.

Andy Hogan wasn't worrying too much about those horsemen, either. He was tall and tough, and on familiar terms with blazing trouble. But he was puzzled by their persistence. They were some of Don Patricio Raile's vaqueros, and usually they showed more scrap. "What d'you make of it, Dirk?" he called.

TRAIL TO HELL

By

L. L. FOREMAN

Full-Length Novel of
Notorious Wildcat
Horse-Hunters



Dirk Keeler gave his carefree shrug. He was a Californian, dark as a Spaniard, full of hell and high spirits. "Looks like Don Pat's boys have lost their starch! That Irish-Mex hot-shot better get a new crew. Say, maybe they figure to jump us

at the river, though! We better shove over fast in one bunch, huh?"

"Yeah. Pass the word to the fellers, while I lay back an' discourage those hombres." Andy pulled in, slid his rifle from its scabbard, and placed two shots that

caused Don Patricio's riders to slacken gait. Dirk spurred forward and hailed the word to their little crew of hard-case hands.

They were a wild, tough pair. Wilder than Andy sometimes cared to consider. They had drifted together into Sombra, in the Sulphur Springs country, heard of the organized-horse-stealing that was going on, and had struck upon the daredevil idea of recovering stolen horses for a fair reward.

It took wild recklessness to play that game—raiding down into Mexico, locating the stolen horses, and dashing back north with them. And there were ranchers who, grudgingly paying the reward, were muttering that maybe the pair were in cahoots with the thieves. It was common knowledge that Perce Juran, notorious badman, was head of the horse-thief gang, and that scrappy Don Patricio Raile was running the chief marketing point for the stolen horses at his Mexican rancho. Few believed that a couple of wildcat horse-hunters could go on bucking Juran and Don Pat, unless they had an understanding with them.

The general suspicion was that somebody was behind the gang—somebody whose purpose was to break the ranchers of Lower Valley. All signs indicated it. What wasn't known, except to Andy and Dirk, was that Juran and Don Pat had sworn to get the pair for interfering in their game.

Dirk dropped back, flashing a grin on his dark, handsome face. "You wasted two shells!"

"Wasn't tryin' to hit 'em," said Andy. "No reason to, yet."

"You're too easy," Dirk chided him. He took aim, fired, and one of the trailing riders sprang clear of his falling horse and stood shaking his fist. Yet still the line kept its distance.

Dirk chuckled. "Lost their starch, sure 'nough, else that'd bring 'em!" He cuffed back his black sombrero and rolled a smoke, lounging lazily in his saddle. "Y'know, this time I'll hang onto my money, I swear. I'll take a pasear back home to Californy an' marry Eileen."

Eileen was the girl he'd left behind him, his boyhood sweetheart. To hear him tell it, she was the jewel of California. But

her father happened to be a stiff-necked judge with an implacable prejudice against the likes of Dirk Keeler.

Andy grinned. "Didn't you say that last trip?"

"Not exactly," Dirk corrected. "That time I got slightly bottled, won a pile at poker, an' wrote askin' her to come here quick an' marry me because I was buyin' a ranch. By some curious turn o' fortune, I then got most mighty drunk an' lost my roll!" He flicked the ash airily from his cigarette. "Oh, well, no harm done. Her pa would never let her come, anyhow, the old buzzard. I'll have to go an' elope with her. Good joke on him!"

"The joke might be on you!" Andy commented. He figured, judging from Dirk's other girls here and there, that Eileen Romney was probably a fiery vixen who'd lead any man a devil's dance. "Say, we're gettin' to the river. High-sign the fellers to start the run. If trouble's comin', here's where she pops!"

TROUBLE wasn't coming. It was lying patiently in wait for them. They ran headlong into it at the river.

They were riding rearguard, their rifles ready, while their crew hit the crossing fast with the band of horses. The south bank of the river sloped down easily to the water. On the north side was a strip of beach, the bank high beyond that and green with cottonwoods.

From the cottonwoods on that high bank, trouble rose and met them. It met them with a catastrophic crash of gunfire.

They had been giving all their attention to the line of vaqueros in the rear. Startled, they faced front. What had begun as an orderly crossing had abruptly become chaos. In the bullet-whipped river the swimming horses were squealing, taking fright, milling around, and the body of the brown mare floated downstream, sinking.

Andy roared through the hideous racket, "Let the horses go an' take care o' y'selves, fellers! Scatter!"

"Scatter where?" Dirk sang out. "That's the whole damn Juran mob up there, an'—hell afire, look behind you! Here come Don Pat's ladinos on the high lope!" He plunged his horse past Andy. "They squeezad us in a jackpot for fair,

this time! Come on, amigo, let's show the dogs our wildcat! This way, fellers!"

They pounded along the shelving bank together, heading the break-through, the remnant of their crew stringing out behind them. Don Pat's riders were thundering forward, closing in to drive them into the murderous maelstrom of the river. The Juran mob stood in plain sight now, hailing shots fast at the little squad of hard-pressed fugitives. It was a massacre trap, coldly and efficiently planned. Juran and Don Pat had finally struck, and they didn't intend to have to do it more than once.

The vaquerous swerved, intent on cutting off escape. Andy shouted to Dirk, "Goin' to beat us to that sandbar, some of 'em! We can make a stand, or try an' break through down to the old ford an' cross there. What's your bet?"

"The old ford or bust!"

"Me too!" Andy triggered his gun empty at the hunters, clubbed it, and leaned forward ready for the smash of meeting them. In moments like these he was coolly savage.

They broke through, half a dozen men gone wildcat, and tore on toward the old ford a mile away. Behind them, Juran and his mob hurled curses at the vaquerous for letting them get clear, and the vaquerous shouted back insults concerning the marksmanship of the Juran mob.

Riding with Andy into Sombra, Dirk said musingly, "Wonder where we can get another good crew?"

"Nowhere!" Andy answered. "The game's blowed up!" He didn't feel too bad about it. A game like that put its mark on a man, made him too sharp on the fighting edge. He knew that it—and other such games—had marked him and Dirk. He had seen other men get that way, growing harder, more and more reckless, intolerant of law, and finally going lobo down the wild trail to outlawry. It was high time to call a halt.

"Maybe you're right," Dirk sighed.

"See you at the hotel later."

Andy went on to the hotel. He was going into the bar for a beer, when Carson Brenfield spoke to him. Brenfield occupied himself with business and politics, and appeared able to combine the two profitably. He wore the clothes and manners of a city man, and Andy always had

a casual feeling that Sombra was sort of small for him. He said to Andy, "Hello, there, Hogan. I've been wanting to talk to you. You've been away."

"Yeah," Andy returned. "Workin'."

Brenfield smiled. The smile deepened the dents beneath his eyes, and his lips flattened, giving his pale face an oddly skull-like look. "It's about the coming election for sheriff," he said. "Old Tolliver has turned in his badge at last, you know. Ben Woodring is being spoken for the job."

"He's a good man," Andy remarked. Ben Woodring was a middle-aged rancher who commanded general respect. He'd get the backing of the solid citizens. "Anybody runnin' against him?"

"Yes." Brenfield produced cigars. "Holt Mayfell."

Andy whistled softly. "Him? Why, that chinchy rum-peddler would sell the law by the pint! Still, he's got plenty pals among the saloon crowd. He might give Woodring a close race. Pity a third candidate isn't runnin', to split the votin'."

"You have political sense," Brenfield complimented him. "Yes, that would clinch it for Woodring—a third candidate who could catch some of the votes away from Mayfell. You, for instance!"

"Huh? Not me!"

"Why not?" You'd be doing a public service, and I'd see that you got credit for it after Woodring's in," Brenfield puffed his cigar and added, "A good standing among Woodring's supporters wouldn't do you any harm, you know."

Andy considered it. He asked, "D'you reckon it'd help me an' my side-kick, Dirk Keeler, get jobs?"

Brenfield looked somewhat surprised. "Jobs? Well, if you're serious—yes. I'll guarantee it, in fact."

"It's a deal," said Andy, and began feeling almost respectable.

CHAPTER

2

The Outlaw Spread

When Andy ran into Dirk later he sensed something wrong. Dirk had a serious air for once, and asked soberly, "You got a room? Let's go to it. I got trouble, Andy! Bad trouble!"

In Andy's room Dirk drew out a letter,

"Found this waitin' for me at the stage express office. It's from Eileen. She's run away from home. She's on her way here to marry me!"

Andy would have laughed, but Dirk's expression stopped him. All he could find to say was, "You're in a jam, amigo!"

Dirk began pacing the floor, his eyes haunted by a terrible dismay. "It was that letter I wrote to her. I had money. I meant to buy a ranch, I swear. Now I'm flat broke! What'll I do?"

Andy had never seen him like this. He said, "She really means a lot to you, eh?"

"Everything!" Dirk answered. "She isn't just another girl, like the others. They don't count. She's—well, she's Eileen. I can see her now, time I told her goodbye when the judge issued a warrant for me after I got in a little trouble. Her hair's soft as silk—brown, with some red in it. Her eyes are a kind of brown that look like they got gold in 'em. Oh, Lawd, what'll I do?"

"Look," Andy said. "I've made a deal with Brenfield. He guarantees to get us jobs."

"Jobs!" Dirk snorted. "Me ride range for forty a month? After my big talk an' all? You don't sabe, man! She's used to a fine house, fine fixin's, silver on the table. What could I give her on forty a month? Hell, no, I got to raise cash quick, enough to buy a place an' fix it up for her!"

"I don't know where you'll get it," Andy observed.

Dirk stood still, staring at nothing. "Hey, wait a minute!" The old gleam crept into his eyes. "Those horses we had to leave at the river. Where would they be now? Back on Don Pat's rancho, right? Sure! An' it's a dead cinch he wouldn't be expectin' us to go back an' lift 'em a second time!"

"We'd be crazy!" Andy stated. "They'd spring another trap on us at the river. Anyhow, we got no crew now."

Dirk gnawed his lip. "We wouldn't have to bring 'em north over the river. We could run 'em farther south an' sell 'em to other Mexican outfits. Now, Andy, listen! That's not stealin'. Those horses are already stole. The owners never will see 'em again, so it's no further loss to them. The loss is Don Pat's, an' he sure

deserves it, don't he? Why not try it?"

"Yeah, but—"

"As for a crew," Dirk continued eagerly, "down in the Triquita settlement there's always some bad boogers hangin' out, mostly broke an' ready to steal Satan's pitchfork for the price of a bottle! I know some of 'em."

"Seems to me," said Andy, "you've been spendin' considerable time down in that Triquita hangout, last few weeks."

Dirk brushed that aside. "Never mind that. Thing is, how 'bout it? One last whirl at the game! You and me?"

"No!" Andy replied flatly.

Dirk drew a deep breath and expelled it. "All right. No hard feelin's. I'll try an' swing it alone. If I don't get back, tell Eileen when she comes—aw, I dunno. Tell her I got killed in a horse-hunt accident!"

"Hold it a minute," Andy growled, as Dirk reached the door. "Wait'll I pack my warbag. Guess I'll go along, dammit!"

Dirk turned swiftly, his face alight. "Andy! You ol' son of a gun! Believe me, you're the best—"

"Aw, shut up!"

COLONEL BROCKLEY, who had tried raising purebred cattle on open range and failed at it, was glad to sell his place cheap for cash, and he didn't ask Andy and Dirk where their cash came from. For two years he had been living on his empty ranch, alone except for his aged Mexican cook, Pancho Pantino. Old Pancho spoke no English, and the colonel didn't know any Spanish. All the colonel wanted was to get back East and forget his losses.

"Devil of a country!" he snapped, packing up and leaving as soon as he had counted the money twice and closely examined every bill. "Anybody's welcome to it!" He departed, leaving them old Pancho, who eyed them gravely, cooked up a mess of chili, and, when it wasn't thrown at him, stayed on.

They were ranch owners. The place didn't have a thing on it but a good house and pens, not a living animal apart from the jackrabbits. But for the time being that had no great significance, at least for Dirk. He went around with his thumbs in his vest pockets, hat cocked, inspecting

this and that, mighty proud of himself.

"She'll like it," he assured Andy. He meant Eileen, and he meant the house.

"What'll you live on," inquired Andy. For his part, he intended to pull out as soon as Eileen came, and line up a steady job for himself. "This is a cowless cow outfit, if there ever was!"

"Me?" Dirk slapped him on the back. "You mean us. We got problems!"

"You got 'em," Andy corrected. "I'm pullin' out, son, before you talk me into rustlin' the neighbors' cows for stock! From here on I—" He broke off. "Hey, what do I see?"

Dirk, following the direction of his gaze, exclaimed softly, "Oh, oh! Callers! Big bunch. An' there's somethin' about 'em that reminds me of—h'm! Could they be?"

"Could be, hell!" Andy headed for the house. "They most damn definitely are! Yeah, the Juran mob! We better fort in!"

They got inside the house, looked to their rifles and sixguns, and stood watching through the front window. The Juran bunch approached steadily, and as they neared it could be seen that others rode with them.

"That's ol' Don Pat himself, an' some of his paisanos!" said Dirk. The advancing danger had its effect on his humor, and he murmured, "Sure was nice bein' a rancher with you, Andy—but, Lawd, wasn't it brief!"

The pack of riders drew up loosely near the yard, but Juran and Don Patricio walked their horses up to within a dozen yards of the house and sat gazing thoughtfully at it. Splendidly mounted and heavily armed, they made a striking sight. Perce Juran, large, red-faced and round-eyed, wore a jovial, clownish air that failed to hide the calmly brutal hardness beneath. By contrast, Don Patricio, thin and unsmiling, had the stiff dignity of a Spanish duke, the flaring temper of an Irishman, and the morals of a cobra.

"Looks like nobody's home," drawled Juran loudly, "else they'd come out an' give us a howdy, wouldn't you think?"

"Should we knock?" suggested Don Patricio. "They have never had to knock on my door to bring me out!"

It was too much to take. Andy and Dirk both pulled open the front door and

they stood there together. "Howdy!" said Andy, and Dirk chimed in with, "Light down an' grab some shade, gents! It's a hot day, an' might storm any minute!"

Juran hooked a thick leg lazily over his saddlehorn and rested an elbow on it. "Glad to find you home, boys. Got a little matter to talk over with you." He motioned toward his companion. "Don Pat's sore about those horses. He came up to burn you out an' take your hides back home for keepsakes! But I told him, no, they're good boys at heart an' they'll make amends. I like to give a man a chance. Guess I'm soft-hearted."

"So's a tarantula!" remarked Dirk.

Juran went on, "You got a good place here. Good location. We like it. As I told Don Pat, I'm sure you'll be glad to make amends by lettin' us use it now an' then."

Andy started to speak, but Dirk got in ahead of him. "That's right generous, Juran. But I don't reckon we want you usin' this place. Might get us a bad name!"

Juran laughed shortly. "Don Pat knows where you sold those horses. If it got known around, who'd believe you didn't steal 'em in the first place? You'd get more'n a bad name from these Lower Valley ranchers! That is, if they caught you alive! An' if they found you dead, I doubt they'd worry who did it! Now, do we get the use o' this place?"

Dirk breathed a little harder. "Give us time to talk it over, my partner an' me."

"Why, sure," Juran assented. Abruptly, his affable mask dropped. He said, staring at them with coldly malevolent eyes, "We'll be back here tomorrow noon—an' Don Pat sure would like to drag your hides home! Sabe?"

He and Don Patricio whirled their horses, nodded to their waiting men, and dust drifted and settled behind them across the dry range.

They talked it over. Andy could have lost his temper and quit, but he recognized the futility of that. He was as deeply involved as Dirk. And even while he argued against knuckling under to Juran's ultimatum, he could see no way to defy it.

Within a few days Andy bitterly regretted the surrender. He would have had to be blind and deaf, not to know that the Hogan-Keeler ranch had promptly be-

come an outlaw spread, the center of operations for the biggest horse-steal he'd ever heard of. The Juran mob had no use for the house. They set up camp in the brush, and used the best section of the range as a handy way-station and rebranding ground for stolen horses bound for Mexico.

On the morning Eileen Romney was due to arrive on the stage at Sombra, Andy paced the floor, wondering angrily whether Dirk, who had now taken to riding with the Juran mob, had forgotten the date or got himself killed. Dirk had been absent for three days and no word from him. Andy swore, thinking of the girl arriving and nobody there to meet her. He kept watch on the time, and finally stamped out the house, saddled up, and rode to town.

"An' what the blazes am I to tell her?" he asked himself. "'Miss Romney, your husband-to-be is either shot, hanged, drunk, or too busy stealin' horses to get here!' Huh!"

CHAPTER

Lobo Lawman

3

Sombra's mainstreet was pretty crowded for that time of day, and as Andy rode in he sensed an undercurrent of disturbance of some kind. He glanced along at the express office and noted that the stage had not yet come in. It then dawned on him that folks were gazing at him in a strange manner. Groups of men ceased talking and stared silently at him riding by. It made him uneasy. Maybe word had leaked out about those stolen horses that he and Dirk had sold.

While he was tying his horse at the hotel hitchrack, Ben Woodring came over toward him. Woodring was a square man and he was built squarely. He was rarely known to blow up, but right now he was evidently close to the flash point. He said loudly, "Hogan, I'll give you my opinion of you to your face, in public!"

"So?" Andy scanned him surprisingly. "Well, now, I got my opinion o' you, too, but I ain't shoutin' it out! What's bit you?"

"You're a trickster and a blackguard!" Woodring announced, stepping up on the boardwalk and facing him in a threatening manner.

"That," Andy admitted fairly, "could be."

Woodring shook a fist in his face. "You lowdown, horse-stealing son of a—"

"That," Andy interrupted, "is goin' a mite too far!" He drove a punch at Woodring's chest, considerably refraining from knocking his teeth in, and the cattleman lit on his neck in the street.

What followed was as unlooked-for as spontaneous combustion. Somebody barked, "Hoddem it, do we stand for that?" And suddenly a score of men—not saloon rowdies, but cowmen and solid citizens, friends of Woodring—rushed at Andy.

He fought them off, retreating along the boardwalk and keeping his back to the store fronts, smashing them back with cut and bleeding knuckles. They kept on coming at him, clawing and striking and kicking at him. It was that kind of riot, peculiar to steady, law-abiding men who suddenly broke all restraint and went berserk.

Slugging, he reached the entrance to Holt Mayfell's dirty little saloon. There he ducked a rock that somebody flung at him, but it bounced off the door-frame and conked him on the head. He exploded then and yanked his gun. He let fly two shots over their heads, at such close quarter that the foremost of them flinched at the sting of the burned powder. The roar of the gun sobered them, jerked them to their senses and stopped them cold.

"You broncoed buzzards!" he panted. He was raging mad. "Pull your irons or pull your freight, one or the other, quick, I don't give a damn which! Jump me, huh? I got a mind to turn loose on you!"

A hand touched Andy and he spun around. It was Holt Mayfell, beckoning him inside. Andy went in and gulped down the glass of whisky that Mayfell handed him. "What got into those long-horned larrikins, anyhow?" he demanded. "Is this town gone crazy?" He dabbed whiskey on his cuts. The smart of it didn't improve his mood.

Mayfell said solemnly, "Election." He was a gangling man with cynical eyes. "You won."

"Well, they didn't, anyhow," returned Andy, "or I'd be in seven hundred pieces about now!"

"I mean," Mayfell said, "the election."

"You're sheriff! You won the election!" Andy stared at him. "Are you crazy, too?"

"Nope. I dropped out as candidate, just before voting began, and passed the word to my crowd to switch over to you. That left just you and Woodring, and when the votes were all in you had the edge. Simple!"

"Well, I'll—!" Andy choked. He had entirely forgotten his deal with Brenfield, under the press of bigger matters. "I'm not surprised they're riled. That was a kind of raw deal to pull on Woodring and his backers, wasn't it?"

"Sure." Mayfell shrugged. "Hell with 'em! Where you goin'?"

"To see Brenfield!"

Carson Brenfield lived at the hotel in the three largest rooms, one of which he used as his office, and there Andy found him. He listened to Andy for a minute, half smiling. "Now look here, Hogan," he cut in crisply. "The election was no freak accident. I lined up every last vote for you, pulled every trick, and told Mayfell exactly when to drop out!"

Andy brought his hands down on the desk with a bang. "You did, eh? Why?"

"Because," Brenfield replied, "you're the man we picked for sheriff. Wanted a job, didn't you? The pay isn't much, but there's plenty to be made if you play along with us—as you will, of course, we knowing what we do about you! Those stolen horses, you know, and the business going on out at your place!"

"Who's 'us'?" Andy inquired.

Brenfield's half smile returned. "Oh—Juran, for instance. And me. And others. And you! You're one of us, like your

friend Keeler. You'll find it profitable, and a lot more so later when we begin picking up ranches for a song! Yes, you're our man. You'll do. Pretty scrap you gave those fools out there. Saw it all from my window. Liked the way you handled them."

"Thanks," said Andy dryly. He was boiling inside, but he kept his voice down. "I take my orders from you, is that it?"

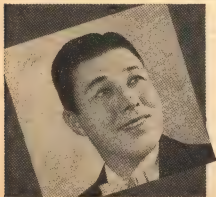
"Exactly," Brenfield agreed. "Here's the key to your office."

Andy picked it up. He was playing with the notion of ramming it down Brenfield's throat, when he heard the noise of the stage rumbling into the street. "See you later, Mister Big Boss!" he murmured, and hurried out to meet it.

SHE stepped down from the Concord coach, assisted by the driver, no less. The express messenger unloaded her trunk as fussily as though it were a glass case of eggs, and the young station agent clean forgot the waybills.

She was lovely. How she managed to appear so fresh and unfatigued after her journey, Andy couldn't imagine. Her dress was unsoiled, and her white gloves hadn't a smudge on them. Andy stepped through the gaping crowd of idlers and stood before her, hat in hand. "Miss Romney?"

She gazed at him cleanly. Her eyes were, as Dirk had said, a rich brown with gold in them. Whatever first impression she got of this tall, battered, tough-looking man, she kept it nicely concealed. "Yes, I am Eileen Romney," she answered him. Her voice was warm, and quietly inquiring.



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He had to look away. Meeting those eyes, he couldn't think of a thing to say, much less tell a lie. He said carefully, looking past her, "Dirk got delayed. He asked me to meet you. I'm Andy Hogan." He knew that people were listening, staring, exchanging raised glances. They were wondering amazingly what possible connection there could be between such a girl as this and a couple of wild hooligans.

Eileen Romney went on studying his face. She smiled with something like relief, and put on her right hand. "Of course—Andy Hogan! Dirk has often mentioned you in his letters. How do you do, Mr. Hogan?"

He was scared to clasp that dainty white glove in his scarred and bloodied paw, so he made out not to see it. "Have to hire a rig from the livery to drive you out to the ranch," he said, more curtly than he intended, and hoisted her trunk up on his shoulder. "This way."

They walked to the livery in silence, until suddenly a band of horsemen hit town noisily like cowboys on a pay-night spree. They burst into the mainstreet, with utter disregard for the dust they raised and the horses they spooked at the hitchracks. And among them a lean and rakish apparition rose in his stirrups and hailed, "Eileen! There y'are, honey! Here I come!"

Andy took one look at the girl. She stood frozen, her eyes wide and shocked, incredulous. He heard her whisper, "Dirk? Oh, no! It can't be—it can't!"

Dirk was half drunk and didn't know it. His gestures were wide, his voice high and hoarse. "Honey," he said, "I got hung up. Had to ride like—uh—had to hurry to get here." Evidently he had stopped at the ranch for a hasty shave and a change of clothes. The shave was patchy and he had nicked himself several times. There had been nothing he could do for his bloodshot eyes and blurred face.

"Fellers!" He whirled around to the grinning Juran riders. "Here she is! My Eileen! Am I proud! Ah, honey, you don't know how proud an' happy I am! Hey, Andy! C'mere, you ol' son an meet my Eileen!"

"We've met," Andy returned shortly. "I'm hirin' a rig."

"No buckboard!" Dirk shouted boisterously, his arm around Eileen. "The red-

wheeled buggy—that fancy one! Nothin's too good today! This weddin's gonna be done in bang-up style! Trot that toney rig out an' let's go!"

It was a strange cavalcade that pulled out of Sombra. The flashy buggy headed it, Dirk driving recklessly and singing, Eileen in the seat beside him. Behind trooped the Juran riders.

The wedding was a strange affair. Eileen and Dirk were married by a preacher whom Dirk had brought out to the ranch from town and the wedding guests were the raucous men of the Juran mob. Soon the ranchhouse was the scene of a wild party.

Suddenly old Pancho came up to Andy. The aged Mexican was frowning, muttering to himself and shaking his head. He said in Spanish, "It is wrong, this marriage—most wrong!"

Andy nodded. "She'll never be happy with him."

"She must!" stated Pancho positively. "He gave her the solemn promise. It was heard by her brothers and uncles. They," he added darkly, "surely will avenge their Nita!"

Andy regarded him. "Who you talking about?"

"Nita, of course!" the old man replied angrily. "Nita, my granddaughter. Nita Anayez, who lives in Triquita with her brothers and uncles, and trusted the solemn promise of Senor Keeler that he would marry her! You understand my meaning, senor? He cannot marry this woman! He gave the solemn promise to Nita, who will certainly make great trouble, and so will her uncles and brothers and—"

"Wait!" Andy snapped. "Where's this Nita now?"

"Down there below the pens, waiting to make the trouble! As to what manner of trouble—" Pancho shrugged—"nobody can predict what Nita will do! Nor her brothers and uncles! It is a violent family and will call the blood feud!"

Andy jumped up. "Lord, here's a mess! Pancho, listen. You go and take Nita back home. This has got to be straightened out, quick!"

He hurried back to the ranch house, and behind his teeth he cursed and condemned Dirk.

CHAPTER

The Price of the Past

The noise in the house now was terrific. Andy found Dirk banging on the closed door of an upstairs room to which Eileen had retired and, calling through it, "Hey, Eileen! Whass wrong, honey? C'mon out!" He turned, reeling a little, and blinked at Andy. It was plain that he had taken on a lot more drink.

Andy drew him away from the door. He said quietly and distinctly, "Dirk, you dog, you got no more right to marry a decent girl than I've got to be sheriff!"

"Huh?" Now see here, Andy—"

"Nita Anavez came here! To make trouble. Sabe?"

Dirk gulped, and glanced furtively at the locked door. "Nita did? Oh, oh! What's she want?"

"As I get it, you promised Nita you'd marry her. Her family's sore an' ready to pop—an' I gather she's the kind that might shove a knife in Eileen, first chance! You can't go on with that hangin' over you an' Eileen. No, Dirk, you got to clean it up, for Eileen's sake as well as your own. Pancho tells me Nita's menfolks are bad."

"They're *muy malo*, all right," Dirk admitted. He rubbed a hand over his mouth. "Phew! Sure bad, Nita comin' here. Wouldn't put it past her to do some harm to Eileen, at that, come to think of it! Didn't think of it before."

"Better think of it now!" Andy commented. "That, an' a few other things." He laid his hand on Dirk's shoulder. "Look, amigo, you can't go on the way you been doin', now there's Eileen. I mean the—uh—horse business an' the rest."

Dirk blinked rapidly and looked away. "You're right," he muttered huskily. "Okay, feller, I'll go straighten out that Nita affair right away. An' the horse business is out. My oath on it, Andy!"

It may have been the drink talking. He was getting all choked up. "I won't stop till the ol' backtrail is all cleaned up!" he swore, and shoved out his right hand. They shook hands on it gravely. Dirk stumbled out by the rear door, and Andy heard him go riding off.

The drunken mob downstairs didn't hear Dirk's departure. Andy went down, and as the chorus ended he called out,

"Party's over! It's time to clear out."

They inspected him challengingly. Juran lumbered forward. "This our sheriff talkin'?" he jeered, and raised a guffaw.

"No," Andy retorted. "It's Hogan, half-owner o' this outfit. I'm invitin' you to get out o' my house!"

They waited for Juran to give the cue. He blandly eyed Andy up and down. "Boys, we ain't welcome! Mr. Hogan, he don't 'preciate our company! He'll learn to, later, but he just ain't got broke in to us yet! Where's Keeler?"

"He left to tend to a matter," Andy told him.

"So?" Juran cocked an eye upward. "So!" He dropped his stare to Andy again. "Now, ain't that curious! Let's go, boys."

Long after they were gone, Andy sat alone in the big downstairs room, smoking, restless.

The sound of a step on the stairs brought him to his feet, for Eileen was coming down into the room. She glanced around and quickly lowered her eyes. He drew out a chair for her. She shook her head wordlessly and moved on outside where at least the sun and air and sky were clean. He followed her out, not too closely, and they stood on the front porch without speaking.

It was impossible, though, to pretend to ignore what had happened. Andy, who never could stall off and dodge an issue, said gently to her, "This is a rough country, an' it makes men rough. You must've known Dirk was always a little on the wild side. But he's okay underneath."

She said, in such a low tone that Andy barely heard her, "It's deeper than that. I can see it. He was gay, always laughing, like a boy, before he left our home town. Wild, yes, but in a good clean way. He was—decent. He's not like that now. Not any more. He's like—like..." She shuddered, and didn't finish.

"I wonder," Andy said, "why you took the chance to come here an' marry him. Most men change some, over the years."

She turned and faced him. "That's true. But when you don't see a person for a long time—years—in your mind you picture him as he was. You can't help it. To me, Dirk was laughter and kindness. He wrote and begged me to marry him. So

I ran away, and came on out here."

Andy couldn't meet the sick misery in her eyes. "He'll straighten out," he muttered. "You saw him at his worst today. He's been workin' hard. He's not himself right now."

"Where has he gone?"

"Had to see to some business. He ought to be back in a few hours. He'll be a good guy again then, you'll see."

Andy was wrong. Dirk didn't show up at the ranch until nearly midnight. He was far from being a good guy again, and Eileen didn't see him. He kicked open the front door and looked in at Andy, sitting by the lamp.

He said, "Blast you, an' Nita, an' all her tribe! Blast me for givin' you my oath while I was all sorry an' softened out! Blast everything!" He pulled out a bottle and drank, spilling some down his shirt. "All day I been arguin' with that tribe! All day!"

Andy didn't stir. Drearily, he asked, "What do they want?"

Dirk thrust the bottle back savagely. "Twenty thousand dollars! You hear? Twenty thousand! Old Pancho's behind it. He was there. He's head o' that family. Truth is, they smell a chance at easy money, an' they all want their whack at it! That Pancho ain't so cracked, the old devil!"

"Can't you get 'em to come down on it?"

"Not by a dime! That's the price they've settled on in their solid skulls, an' they won't budge!" Dirk's eyes flared. "If it wasn't I gave you my oath, I'd tell 'em to turn loose their damn wolf an' I'll skin it for 'em! Let me off that promise, will you?"

One thing they both abided by was their word to each other, any time they gave it. Their trust in each other's word had never been shaken, and was unquestioned. It signified the bond of their friendship.

Andy slowly shook his head. "Dirk, I hate to say it, but you're tryin' to duck out of an obligation you made yourself. For Eileen's protection, you just can't do it!"

"Dammit, what can I do?"

"Might sell this place. I'll throw in my share. It'll help."

"Where would Eileen an' me live? I'd

be broke, an' nothin' to fall back on! An' you got my promise, too, durn you, to quit the horse business, so that's out!"

"Well, you'll handle the thing somehow," Andy observed. "You'll figure a way. You always do."

Dirk suddenly quieted down. He rolled a cigarette and smoked for a while. "I'll handle it, sure. I'll figure a way!" The glitter crept into his eyes. "Yeah, durn right!" he said softly, and backed out into the night, teeth flashing whitely in his old reckless grin. "So long—Sheriff Hogan!"

ARMSTRONG, the Wells Fargo special investigator, sat in the sheriff's office at Sombra and perplexedly ran thick fingers through his graying hair.

"It's the biggest loss we've had in years," he told Andy. "The Bisbee and Douglas mines have been shipping in their payrolls together lately, to shave down on the cost of express and insurance charges. This time the payroll shipment was checked in at over seventy thousand dollars, cash. You know what happened to it! That is, you don't know, and neither do I, except that it's gone! We do know it happened in your bailiwick."

"Sure did," Andy agreed, and thought of Dirk.

Armstrong hunched forward in his chair. "Let's go over it, and see if we can match any pieces together."

In his mind Andy was already doing that, but he didn't say so. He said, "All right, the stage passed through Dinsmore on time, carrying the express box an' no passengers. Right? After it left Dinsmore, a Mexican wood-cutter mentioned seein' some men roll a rock down on the road near the foot o' Soldier Hill. So a squad of armed guards was sent out after the stage. Right again?"

The Wells Fargo man nodded. "But the road agents didn't pull the holdup there at the rock. Maybe they spotted the wood-cutter watching 'em, and got uneasy. They moved way on up the road and jumped the stage as soon as it came over the hill. Killed the express messenger. The squad of guards were close enough to hear the shots. They rode like hell, topped the hill, and saw the road agents—"

"How many?"

"Four. They were ripping open the boot, searching for the express box. Naturally, they quit that when the guards cropped up, and opened fire. The stage-driver, fellow named Hull, took that chance to hit his team and sail out of there quick. The guards took up after the road agents, but they got away after about an hour's running fight south. All right! The express box was still on the stage when Hull, the driver, took off on the downhill run toward Sombra, here. That's certain. Got any pieces matched yet?"

Andy grinned faintly. "I'm fiddlin' with 'em."

"Fiddle with this one!" said Armstrong grimly. "This is the big gold-plated specimen! The stage never reached here. When found, it had passed the rock on the road—passed it, mind you, where there was hardly room to get by—and it lay overturned and wrecked at the next bend. Hull was dead. Shot! And the express box was gone! Match that!"

Andy pondered, and rose to his feet. "Guess I'll ride out to Soldier Hill an' nose around. Might kick up somethin'."

Near Benson's Fork, Andy met old Pancho returning from the Triquita settlement. Riding his placid burro, Pancho would have passed, but Andy halted him and asked for Dirk's whereabouts.

Pancho looked down at his toes. "*Quien sabe?*"

Andy said sternly, "Pancho Pantino! When the sheriff asks a question it is unlawful to lie! Where is he?"

The old Mexican swallowed nervously. "Late last night he came to Triquita on foot. He had walked far. He stayed there, and this morning Señor Juran came. They spoke angry words, but at last they shook hands. When I left they were borrowing a wagon, saying they would need it to-night. That is all I know."

Andy thanked him and rode on. The pieces were beginning to fit together in a vague way, and his suspicion against Dirk was growing. He reached the wrecked stagecoach and examined it. There was a lot of dried blood on the floorboards below the driver's seat, and he studied it for some time. Then he rode on to where the rock had been rolled down onto the road.

From the wheel tracks he judged that the driver had been forced to halt, get

down, and lead the team cautiously around the rock to avoid spilling off the road down into a jumble of rocks below. And, from the many hoofmarks of the nervously stamping horses, the driver had paused for a while after passing the rock.

Andy squatted on his heels, thinking hard. He felt that the pieces of the puzzle were becoming sharper edged, and that he was getting the feel of them, getting them moved closer together. But there was a main piece missing somewhere, and all those hoofmarks bothered him.

He noticed, too, a couple of boot-prints in the loose dirt at the edge of the road. They were small and narrow, made by a riding boot with extremely pointed toes and heels that were nearly round. Familiar boot-prints, those. He stared at them, and surveyed the jumbled rocks below the road. "That tricky son o' Satan!" he murmured.

He shot to his feet, swung into the saddle, and hit a fast lope back to Sombra.

CHAPTER 5 *When Side-Kicks Split*

Armstrong had taken a room at the hotel. Andy knocked on his door and walked in. He said, "If you'll hire a couple o' men an' a buckboard, we'll go get that payroll!"

The Wells Fargo man was stretched out on the bed, scowling at the ceiling. He leaped up as though a wasp had got under him. "You on the level? You found something? You know where it is?"

Andy nodded. "The answer is yes to all three foolish questions. Go hire the help an' a buckboard. I'm not spendin' my money on Wells Fargo!"

"Sweet saints!" muttered Armstrong, and dashed out.

Andy explained on the way to Soldier Hill. "As I work it out, there were five road agents, not four. They shot the express messenger an' the driver, too. Trigger-itchy! The express messenger fell off the stage. The driver rolled off his seat onto the floorboards. The blood shows he lay there for some time. The team spooked, o' course, an' one o' the road agents must've jumped up into the driver's seat, jammed the brakes, and grabbed the lines. Does that seem to fit?"

Armstrong snapped his fingers. "Sure does! Go on."

"When the guards showed up," Andy continued, "four o' the gang bolted. That fifth one, though, he stuck with the stage an' drove off. Nerve! The guards took him for Hull, at that distance. They couldn't see Hull's body down on the floor boards. Well, he couldn't get far with that stagecoach. An' when he got to the rock he had to get down an' lead the team past. Tracks show he fooled around there for a while after passin' it. Then I guess he just laid the whip on an' turned the outfit loose. With the driver dead, an' no brakes on, it smashed down at the bottom bend."

"One of the guards," Armstrong mentioned, "said he thought he saw a riderless horse tailing off into the brush. But no dead or wounded road agent was found, so we didn't think any more of it. How about the payroll?"

"The box was heavy an' that feller was afoot," Andy reminded him. "He was in a hurry, too! Only one thing for him to do was cache it somewhere, soon's he could, an' beat it. There's a scrabble o' rocks below the road there, that he went down into. Shouldn't be hard for us an' these fellers you've hired to find it, if it's there—an' I'm bettin' it is!"

"Well, I'll be scorched!" Armstrong gazed at Andy. "And I've heard a whisper or two that you're not fit to be a lawman! You'll do in my book! Got any idea who that fifth road agent is? You speak of him like you know his mind!"

Andy met the query with half-truth. "He's a feller with a small, narrow foot, quick wits, an' a ton o' nerve!"

"That," observed Armstrong dryly, "would fit a lot of boogers I've known! This Mr. Fifth will come back for the loot, though. We'll set a watch, and trap him. Maybe catch one or two of the others as well, if they've got in touch with him since."

"Good idea," Andy agreed, chills in his back.

In the afternoon Andy rode out to the ranch. Only Eileen was there, and while they were talking a raucous voice broke in on them suddenly. "Well, blast my eyes! Ain't that right pretty, Keeler?"

It was Juran. He stood at the doorway,

looking in over Dirk's shoulder. A wagon and team stood in the yard but Andy and Eileen hadn't heard the wagon come up.

Dirk's face was pale and set, as though in pain. He was staring fixedly at Eileen.

Juran laughed. "Now, that's real friendship, Keeler! It's a real good friend who takes care o' your pretty bride while you're away! Yes, sir! Told you he would, didn't I? Ain't I been tryin' to tell you he only wants you out o' the way so's—"

"Shut your cursed mouth!" Dirk said tonelessly, and Juran's eyes narrowed at his back. "Eileen, pack your trunk! We're leavin'!" He had been drinking, and the drink had gone suddenly dead in him. His hands were twitching uncontrollably.

Eileen gained the stairs. "No! No, Dirk—I'm sorry—I can't!"

He started for her, moving woodenly. Andy blocked his way, saying, "Hold it, Dirk! Don't let any bushwhacking horse-thief put crazy ideas in your head!"

"What?" Juran blared. "What's the name?"

"Bushwhacking horse-thief!" Andy repeated, and saw then that Juran had been drinking hard, too, and that it meant fight.

Juran lunged. His heavy shoulder slammed Dirk forward at Andy. His guns made a soft, rasping whine, steel against leather, coming from their holsters. Instinctively, Andy fended Dirk off with his left hand, struck his face in doing it, and knocked him further off balance. His right hand, busier than it had ever been, dipped and jabbed, and the report of his shot filled the room.

It was too fast a draw for anything like accurate shooting. Juran winced, his ribs raked hard, and fired wild and missed. He pulled the trick of falling, pitching forward as though all through, and lining up his guns as he did it. Andy whirled aside, fired again, and Juran's tumble became real.

Juran rolled over and sat up, his big face masked against the pain of a smashed shoulder. He stared up without expression at Andy, and said, scarcely moving his lips, "Wish I'd been cold sober. I'da got you, Hogan, don't think I wouldn't! Help me to the wagon, Keeler!"

One side of Dirk's mouth was grazed red from Andy's fending hand. He stepped

right up to Andy's gun and threw a punch across it, and Andy took it full in the mouth. "Don't ever call me your friend again, Andy Hogan!" he said hoarsely. "I'll be back tonight for Eileen! She's my wife! You better not be here!"

Andy wiped blood from his lips on the back of his hand. Stonily, he motioned at Juran. "Take that trash with you! An' save yourself the trouble o' goin' for that payroll. We carried it in to Sombra today!"

He meant it as a warning, remembering Armstrong's planned trap, but it wasn't taken that way. Dirk gave a grunt of dismay and blind rage. He was wearing two guns these days, and he dug for them. Andy up-ended his gun, jammed the heel of the butt at him, and hit him between the eyes with it.

Dirk dropped flat on his back, knocked out. Andy bent and lifted him, and nodded to Juran. "You can still walk. Go ahead o' me to the wagon. You'll have to drive, till he comes to. Leave those shooters lay!"

He saw the wagon off, Dirk lying senseless in the bottom, Juran driving awkwardly, and returned to the house. Eileen looked at him whitely. "I'll take you in to Sombra," he told her. "Ma Porter's boarding house is comfortable an' respectable, an' she'll look after you till we can figure what's to be done. Not safe here for you any more. No use tryin' to fool myself. Dirk's gone all wot!"

Eileen said, "That's only happened lately, hasn't it? I mean Dirk—going wot, as you call it. Only since he knew I was coming. And you and he were good friends—until I came! It would be better if I went far away and disappeared!"

ANDY found, in Sombra, that his shooting of Juran had put him in better favor with the Woodring cattle crowd. Juran had been brought in to town by Mohac and half a dozen others, for doctoring, and they had put up at Holt Mayfell's saloon. Soon after their arrival it was rumored that the gang had split, and that Dirk Keeler had taken the leadership away from the crippled Juran. Certain it was that Juran and the few with him were heard cursing Dirk Keeler and the rest of the mob.

Armstrong spoke of it to Andy in the hotel bar. "I've got a hot hunch the hold-

up was the work of some of that gang," he remarked. "It might be the reason they've had a bust-up. Think I'll ship that payroll out tomorrow under heavy guard. That old safe in the express office, you could crack it with a hammer."

Ben Woodring, coming in with old Pancho Pantino, caught the Wells Fargo man's remark, and announced, "You better do something about it, all right! I don't savvy this old paisano's lingo so good, but I catch he's saying something about that payroll! He was looking for you, Hogan, to tell you about it, so I brought him in."

Old Pancho was agitated. He grabbed Andy's sleeve. "Nita came to the ranch again," he related. "You were gone with the lady. She tells me of a matter most grave! He—Señor Keeler—is mad drunk in Triquita, as are the men with him. He swears that this night before the moon he will get back that payroll! Also, the lady, for he has learned where she is! Señor Hogan, must this happen?"

"It sure as blazes mustn't!" exclaimed Andy, and rapidly translated the news to Armstrong and Woodring. "It's a drunken raid, an' no tellin' how many will be in it! Woodring, we haven't got along so good, but I want you for my deputy. Okay? Then gather all the reliable men you know, an'—"

Armstrong, starting for the door, broke in, "I've got to shift that payroll box to a better place right now!"

There were many things for Andy to attend to. As sheriff, he was bound to take charge of preparations against the raid, and expected to do the job thoroughly. Meantime, he was feverishly speculating on how to stave off the necessity for them. Men had to be picked and posted at strategic spots along the main street and around the express office, citizens warned to stay indoors, and the few late storekeepers told to light up at dark as usual, but to bar their doors.

It was already dark when he started for Ma Porter's boarding house, but there came another interruption. A young Mexican girl rode down the street on an undersize pony, glancing keenly about her like a wary wild-thing scenting traps everywhere. She must have spied Andy's badge as he passed a lighted window, for she slid off her pony and the next thing he knew

she was cussing him out hysterically. "My foolish old grandfather came in and told you!" she spat in Spanish.

He knew then that this was Nita. He had never seen her before, to his knowledge. She was pretty. Her dark eyes snapped, and her lips were full and red. A peppery little spitfire if ever he'd seen one. He nodded. "Your grandfather did right."

She tossed her head. "And you—calling himself the friend of my Dirk—you set the 'buscado here to kill him!" she accused him furiously. "I have eyes and I see! You—!"

"Get back on your pony," he cut in. "Ride fast as you can back to Triquita, and warn Dirk to steer clear of Sombra tonight! Get him dead drunk—anything—but stop him from—"

He paused, for somebody was coming up behind him. It was Armstrong. The Wells Fargo man glanced curiously at the Mexican girl, and spoke to Andy. "Well, I feel better about that payroll now. I got the safest man I could find here to slip out with it in the livery buggy and a fast team. He's taking it to Pierce, and it'll be put on the stage there tomorrow."

"Who is he?"

"Your leading citizen—Carson Brenfield. He offered to do it."

"What? Brenfield?" Andy swore. "Look, Armstrong, you couldn't know—but he's the last man I'd trust! Stop him!"

"He left an hour ago!" exclaimed Armstrong. "And I don't know these roads in the dark. You better come with me after him!"

"Soon's I make a call at Ma Porter's!" Andy ran down the street, Armstrong following. Nita was off on her pony.

Ma Porter, a large and formidable female, greeted Andy at her door. "The young lady left an hour ago," she stated. "She gave me a note for you. Here it is."

Andy scanned the note hurriedly by the hall light. It said simply and tragically: *It is best that I go away. Mr. Brenfield has kindly offered to drive me to Pierce. Goodbye—Eileen.*

Andy spun around, bumping into Armstrong. "Come on! Hurry!"

They hit the road fast out of Sombra, followed by puzzled queries from the armed citizens waiting in ambush. There was no time to halt and explain. The night

was black, and Armstrong would have been hopelessly lost, but Andy knew the country.

Racing up the stretch toward Benson's Fork, Armstrong drew ahead. He had a good bay mare, blind in one eye, but fast and of a competitive racing disposition. Near the fork she shied, slithered on loose gravel, and Andy saw the dark bulk of her go crashing into an obstacle on the road.

The spill was complete. Armstrong soared from his saddle and took a header. The mare lunged up, snorting, and bolted. Andy slowed his horse, drew up broadside to the obstacle, and dropped off.

"You hurt, Armstrong?"

"Broken collar-bone, I think. What in hell did I hit?"

Andy examined the obstacle in the dark. It was the flashy red-wheeled buggy, wrecked on the road. He thumbled a match, and a voice, the voice of Carson Brenfield, asked wearily, "Who're you?"

"Hogan."

"Oh. Hello, Hogan."

Brenfield lay beside the buggy. He said, gazing up wonderingly, "Never trust a lobo! They'll cross you up in the end! I tipped Juran and his pals to pull a fake stickup on me along here. Told him to make it look good. He did! Gunned me and wrecked the rig. Took the payroll. Took that girl, too. She screamed like hell!"

"Which way did they go?" Andy demanded urgently.

"South," Brenfield mumbled. "Mexico. Juran's skinning out. He's through. Keeler is heading the main bunch. Heading for a smash-up!" He laughed weakly. "Juran's got all the winnings. Keeler—"

"I sent Nita Anayez to warn him off."

"Generous of you, Hogan! But I know Juran was watching the road to Triquita, to stop anybody from going to tip Keeler off not to make his crazy raid. They caught that Mexican girl, you can bet on it! Oh, well..."

He raised his head off the ground. He stared blankly at something only he could see. "Damn it all! You scheme and plan. You build it right up. Then a brainless ape, a killer—like Juran—rips the sack! And—it's—all gone..."

His head fell back, and he was dead. Carson Brenfield, the man of brains, the

hidden chief, was dead. Behind him he had left his instruments, the men of blood and violence, running amuck.

Andy said, "Mexico—but which route? They'll have to hole up somewhere before morning. Juran's shoulder an' ribs won't let him travel too long. Where? Dirk, he'd know. I got to get hold o' Dirk!" He ran to his horse. "I got to go, Armstrong!"

"Sure," Armstrong answered, and watched him clatter off into the darkness toward Sombra.

CHAPTER "He's OK Underneath"

6 While he still had over a mile to go, Andy heard the crashing eruption of gunfire that meant Dirk had led his band into Sombra, expecting to surprise the town, and ridden full into a blazing death-trap. Andy quirted his horse, and when he swung into the main street it was a battleground. From their carefully chosen positions of cover the Sombra possemen were able to blast the raiders down like rats in a barrel.

Some of Dirk's men had reached the express office, and there died, shot to rags by a dozen sharpshooters waiting inside. Others, gunned from their saddles, lay in the street while their riderless horses ran about in mad panic. Three who had made it to the entrance of Mayfield's saloon, and found the door barred, were putting up a dogged, hopeless stand there. The gang was smashed, wiped out in its first raid under the new leader.

Dirk, wearing a snarling grin, was backing crazily to the front of Ma Porter's, guns spurting in his fists. Andy spurred his horse at him, risking possemen's bullets, shouting, "Up behind me, Dirk—quick!"

For an instant old habit started Dirk forward in response, his face lighting up. But he stepped back again, levelling his guns. "Get the hell away from me, Sheriff Hogan!"

The door of the boarding house opened behind him. Ma Porter, who disliked unseemly disturbances and coarse language anywhere near her respectable premises, appeared with an iron skillet. She banged the skillet down on Dirk's head, and re-treated like a dignified elephant into the

house and shut the door with finality.

Dirk swayed, knees bowed and eyes crossed. Andy reached over and grabbed him before he toppled, and hauled him up across his saddle. Everybody was bawling at him now excitedly, and Woodring and a couple of others were running at him. He swung his horse around, knocking Woodring asprawl, charged up the street, and cleared town on the run.

Long before reaching the fork, Dirk came to, fighting mad and cursing Andy, who cut him short. "I didn't yank you out o' that jackpot just to save your hide, don't worry," Andy snapped curtly. "Juran an' his pals are fightin' a shuck for Mexico with Eileen an' the payroll—an' Nita as well, I reckon! They nailed Brenfield on a double-cross. He's dead."

He had pulled in, and Dirk had got down to the ground. Dirk stared at him and mumbled, "They—got—Eileen?"

Andy nodded grimly. "They won't make Mexico tonight, you know that. Where'll they hole up tomorrow? What's the likeliest hangout they'd use, goin' south from the fork?"

"Liwamani—the old Indian ruins in Maze Canyon!" Dirk exclaimed at once. "Juran used to operate from there when he was bustin' banks, couple years ago." He scrambled up behind Andy. "Hit this nag up an' let's go—and don't spare that quirt!"

"He won't last the night, loaded double. We'll be afoot long before we get where we're goin'!"

"I've walked before! I'd walk the whole damn way barefoot if I had to!"

"You wouldn't be alone, brother!"

By the early gray rim of dawn they crouched above the canyon, peering down at what little they could see of ancient Liwamani. Most of the forgotten old Indian stronghold lay under the dry silt of centuries, so that the whole place was so well hidden, the flat roofs mostly flush with the surrounding ground level, that it took searching to discern only part of it.

Dirk murmured "You wouldn't think it, but a hundred men an' horses could hide down there. Nearly all the little rooms underground are connected by tunnels an' holes, some of it the work o' Juran's old bank-robbin' gang. The grand kiva—the secret lodge, or whatever the Injuns used

it for—is damn near the size o' that theater in Tombstone we went to once. Juran used it to store his bank-bustin' tools an' stuff. Some hide-out! Wonder are they there?"

"Let's look," said Andy. "Lead on. You know the way down."

They got painfully to their blistered feet. The horse had given out, far back, and they had tramped. High-heeled boots were not made for walking, especially Dirk's narrow, tight-fitting ones with pointed toes.

The trail down into the canyon was deceptive. It appeared difficult, even impossible in places, but closer acquaintance proved it to be safe enough. No guards were on watch, that they could detect. The Juran crew, if they were here, evidently felt secure in their lonely, buried roost.

"What do they do with their horses?" Andy asked.

"There's a big cleft on the far side o' the canyon, that's fenced in at the openin' to make a pen," Dirk replied. "Can't see it from here. Let's mosey over an' take a look." He had dropped his guns when Ma Porter clouted him with her skillet, but he was carrying Andy's short rifle, taken from the saddle scabbard when they abandoned the horse, and a few shells.

Riding through the night, then tramping, and now prowling warily into a place that shrieked of danger, their bitter split was forgotten between them. In their common cause they were working together as one, as they had done so often before, in complete trust, each knowing that the other could be depended on to the last step and the last shell. They were cool, capable, and desperate, two tough hombres on the sharp prod.

Horses were in the hidden pen, so tired they barely took notice of the two creeping men. "Not been here long," whispered Dirk. "Let's find Eileen. Hope to Satan we don't walk in on the bunch! This place is so damn big they could be anywhere. We'll just have to—Listen! What's that?"

It was a scream of rage. Dirk grinned crookedly. "They got Nita, all right! She sure sounds mad! Where'd it come from, could you tell?"

"Over that way." Andy pointed to a dugout-like cabin. Somebody had dug the earth away from one side and built a crude

wooden door into the exposed old adobe wall.

"That's a door Juran put in," Dirk muttered. "There's more, I guess, but the only other'n I know of is way yonder in the roof o' the big kiva. Well," he shrugged, "we might's well take the chance an' go in."

They crept to the wooden door. No way had been provided to fasten it, and it yawned open on leather hinges at a push. It was coming full dawn now, but inside they stared into blackness.

ANDY went in, groping cautiously forward, not daring to strike a match. He fetched up against a rough wall, found a gap in it, and explored its size. The drifting sand and silt had sifted in and raised the level of the floors, making it necessary to stoop beneath the thick mud roof. Beyond the gap he heard an in-drawn breath signalling the coming of another scream.

"Quiet!" he hissed. "That you, Nita? Is Eileen there?"

Eileen's whisper came to him, weary, trembling with a vast relief. "We're both here. We're all right. But our hands are tied to a post."

"Where's Juran an' the rest?"

"They were asleep, farther along. A few minutes ago we heard them get up and move on, as if something had alarmed them."

"Is my Dirk with you?" whispered Nita. "Ah, Dirk—I!"

Behind him Andy caught a low, savage grunt from Dirk, and he turned swiftly. Outlined in the open doorway, Dirk stood frozen, crouched. Just back of him crouched other figures, one of them jabbing a gun in his ribs. And the voice of Mohac, heavy and slurred, came like the pronouncement of a hanging judge. "Drop the rifle, you son! You, Hogan, come on out! We got 'em, Juran!"

"I'm comin'!" responded Andy.

There was no chance to give Dirk a sign. It was too dark under the low roof. But Dirk knew. He didn't need any sign. He knew Andy would never give up like that, knew Andy was coming to get him out of the jam if he could, and he played his part. Already crouched, he ducked lower and threw himself backward into the men behind him. The gun at his ribs

went off, a shade ahead of Andy's first shot, and Dirk bounced away and came tumbling inside. He still held onto the rifle. He flopped over, fired it three times, and showed out his foot and kicked the door shut.

They were in utter darkness. Andy went through the gap and located Eileen and Nita. They sat back to back, wrists tied to a post between them. He cut them loose, and called, "Come on, Dirk!"

"Don't rush me!" said Dirk. "I'm guardin' the door, same time tyin' my ribs together with my shirt! Glad you dropped Mohac. He sure got me—bullet, powder an' wad!"

Nita darted out to him and helped him through the gap. "You better let me take the lead, Andy," Dirk advised. "I think I know the route through to the big kiva. Look out! They're comin' in after us! Take care of 'em, feller! I'm kinda stiff, but I'll limber up."

They struggled on through the pitchy blackness, tripping, falling, banging their heads against low roofs and tiny tunnels, Andy keeping up a rearguard action against the Juran crew. Shooting was a matter of watching for gun-flashes and letting drive at them. It was a mad nightmare.

"Think—we're gettin'—there!" Dirk panted. "Bit o' light—ahead. Kiva. Hole—in roof. Yeah. Here 'tis. Watch out!" He swayed away from Nita, tipped the rifle up, and fired. In the little square entrance up in the roof of the huge old ceremonial chamber, a face jerked, went blank, and fell away.

Here the roof was high, as in most Indian kivas, and the ladder which the Juran

crew must have used had been drawn up and laid outside. Andy boosted Eileen up and got her through the hole, then did the same for Nita. It had to be done fast. The pursuers could be plainly heard coming along through the last few little connected rooms.

Dirk laughed harshly. "Hey, look, Andy—there's that damn express box! No good to us now. We ain't goin' to get out of this jackpot! They can pick us off as we climb that cliff-trail, if we get that far!"

"We'll make a try!" Andy countered. "D'you reckon you could hoist that box up to me after I climb out?" He leaped, got his fingers over the edge of the hole, and with the help of Eileen and Nita he climbed out.

It felt good in the sunlight, but he hadn't time to appreciate it. Dirk was struggling with the express box, raising it. Andy, lying flat, reached in and relieved him of it, and dumped it outside. "Now you, Dirk—give me your hands, quick!"

"Wait a minute." Dirk stumbled hurriedly to one side of the kiva. "There's a couple cans o' blastin' powder somewhere round here, I 'member. Stuff Juran used on the banks. Yeah, here they are! Satan, this ought to stop 'em!"

A gunbarrel poked around the low doorway through which they had entered the kiva. Andy, leaning in, spied it and cut a shot at it. His position was awkward, and he missed. "Dirk, come on!"

"Hold 'em off, I got a job here!" Dirk rolled the cans over close beside the low doorway, and knocked the lids off. For a fuse he tore a strip from his bloodstained shirt, laid one end across the open pow-

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der cans, and struck a match and lighted the other. Then he came reeling toward the roof entrance, his face strained.

Nita, pushing beside Andy, was screaming at Dirk to come on out. Three times Andy blazed at the low doorway and discouraged the searching muzzle of a gun. The Juran crew were crowding there, getting ready to rush in. His gun clicked empty and he hastily began reloading. He heard Dirk's rifle go off, enormously loud in the great round chamber, and Dirk's oath. "Dammit, it's gone out!"

Before Andy could stop her, Nita dropped back into the kiva. With his gun only half-loaded, Andy leaned down again and looked in.

The burning strip of shirt had gone out. Dirk, fumbling a match, was staggering back to do the job over again, and Nita was running after him. It was then that the Juran crew, recognized abruptly what he was up to, came shoving through, firing frantically at him.

Dirk shook, riddled. He tottered on, against tearing lead, the lighted match in his fingers, Nita hanging onto him and sobbing. His yell was weak, but somehow gay. It was like his old, laughing reckless whoop.

"Here we go, an' adios!"

Andy quickly leaped away, dragging Eileen with him. There was a loud whoosh, turning into an explosion like the roar of a volcano. The great flat roof of the kiva bulged and blew up from the tremendous inside pressure, and subterranean rumblings told of walls caving in down below. Chunks of adobe and stone flew upward through a rising cloud of ancient dust, and rained down in giant hail while the echoes of the blast seemed to rock the canyon with their mighty booming.

At last came the silence, utter silence in which nothing moved. And in the thick haze of acrid dust a man and a girl, deafened and only half-conscious, lay staring dazedly at a gaping, rubble-choked crater.

Woodring and the possemen from Sombra didn't have much to say at first. The presence of Eileen restrained them. And they kept looking at the express box that she and Andy were sitting on. They did mention that they had been out all night,

tracking Andy and Dirk to the hide-out.

Andy figured maybe it was up to him to start the talking, and he did so, not sparing himself.

Woodring pursed his lips. "Some horses o' mine were in that bunch," he remarked. "Frankly, I always kind of suspicioused Dirk Keeler had a hand in lifting 'em. You say he didn't. Well, I'll take your word for it. We found Armstrong on the road. He told us about Brenfield, and why you had to get hold of Keeler. Your motives were okay there, but your methods were most mighty rough and lawless! As for Dirk Keeler—"

Andy stopped him. "If it hadn't been for Dirk, we'd never have seen Eileen or this payroll again! It was Dirk who busted the Juran mob, an' has made your Lower Valley country a somewhat better place to live in than it was! Never mind why he did it. He did it, an' killed himself doin' it! Remember that, an' forget the rest!"

"Tell you what." Woodring glanced at Eileen. "For those of us who lost horses in that bunch you sold, it's to our advantage to have you able to pay us off in due course. That is, pay us what you and Keeler got for 'em."

"Where'll I find the money?" Andy queried tiredly.

"You're sitting on it!" Woodring mentioned. "Armstrong says the usual reward, paid by the express-insurance people, is twenty percent of the value of any recovered property reported lost or stolen in transit. Did you know that?"

"No. Haven't had much time to think about it."

"Well, start thinking. It'd give you enough to stock that cowless ranch you've got, and in a year or two you'd be able to start paying for those horses. Personally, it'd suit me to take mine in trade of some kind—maybe a grazing deal. Purely business with me, you understand. It'll be some trouble to you, of course."

"Trouble's no stranger to me!" said Andy.

Woodring's grin broadened. "No? But you'll have help." He glanced again at Eileen. "Won't he?"

She said nothing. She just nodded, flushing.

HOLD YOUR FIRE!

Reckless Dave Grant laughed at the sheriff's warning — but he wasn't laughing when he pulled a hot gun in a storm of cold hate.

By
A. C. ABBOTT



Dave was too sick
to argue.

DAVE GRANT knew he was going to have trouble in town that day; he knew it even before Sheriff Hyde stalked up to him there in the saloon and asked with cool hostility, "Got the afternoon off?"

Dave's wide mouth stretched into a lazy grin that matched his drawl. "Got the rest of my life off."

"Fired?"

"Fired." Dave's dark face was expressionless, but his voice took on a chal-

lenging edge. "Glad to hear it, right?"

"Depends." With maddening slowness the raw-boned Sheriff rolled a cigarette and lit it, his eyes never swerving from Grant's face. Then he said, "I heard about that fight you had yesterday at the Circle S, and I figured Saunders would fire you. You're gettin' too damned quick with a gun, Grant."

Grant lifted wide shoulders in restrained irritation. "Cherry drew first."

"Yeah. All the fellers you've shot have

drawn first, but I don't like it one bit."

Abruptly Dave Grant's lazy attitude vanished. He straightened against the bar, a tall young puncher whose gray eyes bored into the Sheriff like cold steel. His voice was dangerously quiet as he asked, "What do you figger to do about it?"

"I figger," Hyde said deliberately, "to hand you a friendly warning. If you hang around town waitin' for Saunders to come in and there's any trouble, I'm goin' to run you in."

Dave laughed shortly. "Can't Saunders take care of himself? From what I hear—"

"Maybe he can," the Sheriff interrupted, "but I'm tellin' you, cowboy. I've had enough of your gunplay. You're too damn hair triggered."

"Ahh! Well, if I had wanted to kill the old goat," Dave said bluntly, "I'd have done it yesterday when he cussed me out."

"Unless you were afraid of him!"

Dave's muscles bunched with the instant desire to slam a fist into the Sheriff's face, but he forced himself to stand steady. He couldn't, however, keep still. "Maybe I'm gettin' too quick with a gun, mister," he drawled coldly, "but you're altogether too damned quick with your tongue. You got anything more to say?"

Hyde shook his head slowly, almost regretfully. He murmured, "Watch yourself, cowboy." Then he turned his back on Dave and ordered a beer.

With a swift angry gesture Dave downed his drink and strode out of the saloon, his spurs clanking harshly. He stepped to the boardwalk, squinting painfully in the glaring sunlight, heading for his horse. Then he stopped short.

A man was dismounting at the hitch-rack, a medium-sized bow-legged cowman whose narrow shoulders were squared arrogantly. The once white Stetson he wore was set at an uncompromising angle on his small head, and he swore viciously as the bay horse tried to nuzzle him. As he turned toward the saloon, Dave Grant gazed squarely into the washed out blue eyes of his former employer, Mike Saunders.

A chilling premonition of disaster swept through Dave, but he stood his ground, returning the old man's hard stare and waiting for him to speak. One flashing glance told Dave that Saunders did not have a

gun in sight, but that didn't mean anything. The old cowman had been known to carry a shoulder gun under his brush jacket, and he had also been known to use it with blinding speed. That was the main reason the Circle S was such a smashing big spread with no close neighbors.

Dave had not paid much attention to Hyde's warning, there in the saloon, because he had had no intention of waiting for Saunders. As far as he was concerned, that business was finished. He was pulling out for the San Pedro to look for another job. Now, however, as he noted the ruthless set of Saunders' jaw, he remembered those words of warning; and he knew that Hyde had meant exactly what he said.

Then Saunders ducked under the hitch-rail and started toward him, moving slowly a step at a time, as if feeling his way. He stepped up to the boardwalk and stopped, eyes unreadable, jaw set grimly.

"You still around?" he asked, and his tone was insulting.

"Still around," Dave admitted coolly.

"I thought I made it clear to you yesterday that this country don't need you any more."

Hyde's warning was ringing cold and clear in Dave's mind, but it was overshadowed by stronger thoughts. He knew he had lost his job mostly because Saunders could not frighten and bully him as he did the other men. He also figured that Saunders had been the big "You-do-it" around Welton too long to take backtalk twice from the same man, and Dave had once already politely invited him to go to hell.

Now he could not have backed up if he had tried. With calculated insolence he leaned a shoulder against the saloon wall and regarded Saunders with a taunting grin. "Your mistake," he drawled mildly. "You made it clear that you didn't need me, but that just made it unanimous. I don't need you, either."

Saunders' eyes narrowed dangerously, and the cords in his neck stood out plainly as he struggled for self control. Then he asked harshly, "Are you lookin' for trouble?"

"Not unless it's lookin' for me," Dave returned promptly.

Abruptly Saunders grunted incoherently to himself and started past Dave toward the saloon door. Surprise and relief flooded through Dave and welled up in a nervous laugh. Saunders whirled, his face flaming, his right hand out of sight under his jacket.

Without hesitation Dave flung himself away from the wall, drawing and firing while he was still moving. That bullet went home. Dave saw it strike dust from the left side of the brush jacket. Then he saw something else that he was to keep on seeing. . . .

For one terrible instant Saunders stood as if rooted, his eyes wide open in shocked amazement. His right hand jerked convulsively into view holding—a cigar! Then his eyes glazed and he fell backward, heavily, arms outflung. His unbuttoned jacket fell away from his chest, and Dave saw that he was not wearing a gun.

DAVE never knew afterward how long he stood there, staring down at that dead body while sickness ran through him like poison. It seemed like hours, but it couldn't have been more than seconds before men were pouring from the saloon. Dave heard their exclamations without registering them. Then Hyde's voice reached him clearly.

"So you *were* afraid of him! Waited to catch him without a gun!"

"No!" Dave wanted to shout his protest, but his voice was barely audible. "He reached for that damned cigar. I thought—"

"Anybody see it?" Hyde cut in sharply. An ominous silence greeted his question. Hyde's hand was on his gun but he made no move to draw it from the holster. "That story won't hold, Grant. Damn you, I warned you!"

"It was an accident," Dave protested thickly. "My gosh, I wouldn't have shot him if I'd known he wasn't packin' a gun!"

Someone—the bartender—laughed harshly. "I never liked Saunders, but I won't stand for murder. Take his gun, Sheriff."

"Better give it to me, Grant," Hyde ordered, but his tone lacked conviction. "No use makin' it worse."

It was that uncertainty in the Sheriff's

voice that awakened Dave to his dangerous situation. He remembered Hyde's words, "I'm goin' to run you in!" But the Sheriff would never get the job done. They'd hang him right on the spot.

He wondered vaguely why they didn't draw on him and get at it. Then he realized he still held his gun, and they were afraid of him. Abruptly he shifted the muzzle and centered it on Hyde's shirt front.

"Don't *you* make it worse," he said, and his voice had gone suddenly flat and deadly. "I claim this was an accident, and I won't hang for it if I can help it."

"We'll track you down," Hyde said doggedly.

"You're welcome to try. Now stand pat, all of you, or you're goin' to have a wreck."

Feeling cautiously for the edge of the walk, Dave stepped into the dust, backed to the hitchrack and ducked under it with smooth quickness. With his left hand he jerked loose the knot holding his brown horse and lifted himself to the saddle. He was aiming for a quick clean getaway, but he didn't make it.

The horse, always spooky, took that moment to shy at some imagined danger and for just a second Dave lost the drop. He saw Hyde stab for his gun but he could not swing his own gun in time to stop the shot. Then an unreasoning fury surged through him, and viciously he hauled the brown horse around. He'd fight it out now against the whole damn town! The hell with 'em!

He heard the whine of Hyde's first bullet while he was still fighting the horse. Hyde's second shot sent a white hot slug through Dave's left arm. The reins slipped from his numbed hand, fell loosely on the animal's neck; and the horse took over from there. One wild lunge carried him to the middle of the street and then he was stampeding blindly.

Other bullets were whistling around Dave now, and it sounded to him as if half the people in town were shooting at him. He twisted in the saddle to shoot back, but he held his fire. He knew that trying to shoot from the back of that frantic, plunging horse would be a waste of the ammunition that he might need later. He caught one glimpse of Hyde's heavily lined

face, gray and snarling with hot anger.

It was no use. Swearing in futile rage, Dave turned back in the saddle, holstered his gun and gathered up the reins with his right hand. Then, sick and furious, he bent low over the horse's neck and hitchtailed.

The sun was sliding down toward the Black Mountains across the valley when Dave pulled his stumbling roan to a halt in the low foothill pass. With an effort that brought a low groan out of his throat, he shifted in the saddle so that he could look back over the chopped-up canyon country he had just left. Trailing in that broken, rocky land was slow, but the posse would be rimming out before long; and they would know he had crossed this saddleback. Sheriff Hyde might be sluggish in movement, but he never quit.

Some time during the last two days—Dave could not remember now just when it was—he had cornered this roan in a box canyon and roped him. He had proved to be a good horse but, unshod, had quickly gone lame. Now Dave had to have another if he were going to get on into the Durham Mountains and safety.

Safety! As that word flashed into his mind, Dave heard himself laugh harshly. He rubbed the back of his hand across his stubbled jaw, then grabbed convulsively for the pommel as he felt himself swaying. *Hang onto yourself, cowboy!* he thought grimly. He was light-headed, knew he was feverish. The wounded arm, too long untended and then improperly dressed, had cost him a lot of blood and was now infected. The constant throb had him almost crazy, but it wasn't in him to give up. They were going to get him, but they'd know how they got the job done!

He cursed thickly, forcing himself to concentrate on the small huddle of ranch buildings below him in the foothill pocket. There were three horses in that corral down there, and Dave intended to have one of them. He glanced at the neat little cabin under the oak trees, saw smoke issuing lazily from the chimney.

For just an instant he hesitated; then his hand dropped to the cold butt of his gun. Whoever was in that cabin was going to part with a saddle horse, willingly or otherwise.

Dave knew now that Hyde had been

right. He *was* too quick—too quick to flare, too quick to throw a gun. He would give anything to correct the mistake he had made, but it was too late now. He couldn't go back. He had to go on, to keep going on 'til they got him.

The cabin had looked close from the pass, but Dave rode almost a mile before he cut the trail leading through thick mesquite into the clearing. He stopped the horse, reached for his gun to check the loads. Then his blood turned to ice.

"Stick 'em up, mister!"

DAVE didn't stop to think about that voice. He rammed home the spurs, jumping the horse across the trail. He pulled around in a quick pivot, his gun in hand, thumb on the hammer. That gun hand froze, and Dave turned weak as he realized how near he had come to being too quick a second time.

A tow-headed kid stood there in the brush, probably five or six years old. His wide blue eyes were fixed on Dave with owlish solemnity, and his stubby little fist was closed tightly around a toy gun.

"Say!" he blurted. "You're sure quick with a gun, mister."

"Yeah." Dave holstered the gun, wiped the back of a trembling hand across his lips. *I'll never throw a gun again without looking*, he vowed to himself. Aloud he said, "You sure scared me, cowboy."

The kid grinned. "I was just practicin'," he explained matter-of-factly. "You know you gotta practice if you're gonna get good with a gun."

"Yeah." Dave forced a crooked grin. "Don't practice too much sonny. You don't want to get—too quick."

"Can't be too quick," the boy announced. "I'm gonna kill Mr. Saunders." Before Dave could reply to that startling statement, the kid changed the subject. "Your horse is lame," he observed. "You want I should get you some shoes for him, mister? We got some out to the barn."

"Well—" Dave hesitated, glancing with apparent indifference towards the buildings partly visible through the brush. "Is your dad out at the barn?"

"Nope. Come on. I'll get 'em for you."

As the boy turned toward the shed-like barn, Dave rode directly to the small stone house. Just beyond the house, with

only a few feet between, stood another building, used probably as a bunkhouse. Dave gazed narrowly at the vacant windows of that second building, wondering if there were anyone in it. Then movement at the door of the house pulled him around sharply.

A woman stood there, a slight tired-looking woman dressed in levis and boots, her dark brown hair straggling from under a battered Stetson. Her brown eyes were levelled questioningly at Dave.

"Yes?" she said tentatively.

"Is your—" Dave got just that far when the odor of boiling coffee came through the open door and stopped him. He hadn't thought of food, hadn't felt hungry; but suddenly he wanted some of that coffee. It would wake him up, put life back in him. He forced his gaze back to the woman's face and saw that she was hurrying toward him.

"You're hurt!" she exclaimed. "You're sleeve's bloody."

"I'm all right," he said thickly. "Stand back. Is your husband here?"

She started to shake her head and stopped, an expression almost of shock crossing her face. Then she laid a commanding hand on his arm. "Go on in the house and get some coffee, Mr. Grant," she ordered calmly. "I'll saddle a fresh horse for you while you drink it."

"I haven't time—" he began.

She shook her head impatiently. "There's no one here but Johnny and me. Go get some coffee. You can watch the pass from the kitchen window."

Dave was too sick to argue. He slid stiffly from the saddle and would have fallen except for her grip on his arm. He got his feet under him somehow, saw her start toward the barn leading the roan. He turned toward the door, and only then did he realize she had called him by name.

He stumbled on into the neat kitchen-living room of the house took a quick look into the bedroom where brightly flowered curtains rippled gently at the open windows. There was no one in sight. Fumbling clumsily he poured himself a cup of coffee and sank into a chair. He was weaker than he had thought, and he didn't care much whether the woman had lied to him or not.

The hot coffee, however, seemed to flow

throughout his system, stimulating and strengthening. He poured a second cup and moved to the window where he could watch the pass. The posse had not topped it yet, but they would soon. Then the woman returned, and Dave caught a glimpse of a powerful sorrel horse that gave him a new lease on life.

"I'm Mrs. Monroe," she said as she moved up close to him. She looked him over critically, then abruptly ordered, "Sit down." He hesitated and she shoved him into a chair near the window. "I'll fix that arm."

Dave watched dumbly as she crossed to the stove and filled a plate with warm beans and fried potatoes. She dragged another chair closer to him to serve as a table and set the plate before him.

"Better eat that," she suggested gently. "You need it."

"I'm not hungry," Dave mumbled in embarrassment. Nevertheless he picked up the fork and began automatically shoveling the food into his mouth. His head was clearing a little, and several thoughts were crowding into his mind, demanding attention.

"You're just plain sick," Mrs. Monroe observed anxiously, and Dave wondered at her tone. She was doing a fast neat job of dressing the feverish arm, easing the pain considerably.

"I'm all right," Dave said for the second time, "but I'm some curious. You know me?"

"I heard about you."

Johnny stuck his straw-colored head in the door. "Where are those horsehoes?" he demanded peevishly. "I can't find 'em, and that roan is sure lame."

"It doesn't matter, Johnny," his mother said quickly. "We'll shoe him later. You go play."

"Maybe they're in the bunkhouse," Johnny said and disappeared again.

"If you know what I did," Dave began slowly, but she interrupted him.

"My husband stopped to argue," she said with hot restraint, "because he didn't think Saunders was carrying a gun. Saunders killed him."

Dave understood then why little Johnny was practicing with a gun. And he understood more fully some of the rumors he'd heard about Mike Saunders' methods of

keeping small ranchers off the fringe of his range.

"I don't blame you," she went on, and her voice was once more calm, tired. "If Saunders had been armed and you'd hesitated, it would have been too late."

"Yeah, but that might have been better—" Dave broke off, suddenly ashamed of his bitterness. "You run this place all by yourself?"

"We don't have many cattle, and Johnny helps me." Her lips curved in a proud rueful little smile. "He's a pretty good cowboy."

"I'll bet he is." A horse came into view, silhouetted sharply in the pass, and Dave abruptly stood up, rolling his sleeve down over the new bandage. "I'm obliged to you, Mrs. Monroe. Is there a good trail up this canyon behind the house?"

"A good trail," she assured him quickly. "It takes you straight up to the pass over the Durhams and from there on you've got a hundred square miles of the roughest country you could hope for."

"Thanks." Dave strode to the door and hesitated, not knowing what to say to her. She had helped him more than she might have guessed. He said again, gruffly, "Thanks."

She held out her hand, a strong brown little hand that gripped his in a firm clasp. "I hope you make it," she said simply.

He stepped through the door into the waning afternoon, reached for the trailing reins. The crunch of gravel caught his attention and he looked up, expecting to see Johnny. He was still thinking about Saunders and about Mrs. Monroe's endorsement of the impulsive action that had ended in tragedy.

PERHAPS because of this, his mind was slow to grasp the fact that it wasn't Johnny standing there. It was a man who had stepped from the opening between the house and bunkhouse. Sheriff Hyde stopped short, his jaw slackening for a moment in amazement, then tightening grimly. His hand poised claw-like above his gun.

"Where in hell'd you come from?" Dave blurted foolishly.

"I knew you'd head for this ranch to get a horse," Hyde said narrowly, "so I circled around. I thought I had beat you

here—" He took a deep breath. You're under arrest, Grant."

Dave heard himself laugh mockingly. The big sheriff would have had him cold if he'd come around that corner with a gun in his hand. But he had been surprised himself and now he was bluffing. Dave drawled coolly, "Gonna take me in?"

"You're damn right! Give your gun."

The way he said it, like that warning in the saloon, Dave knew he meant every word. The sheriff's confidence might be a bluff, but his determination wasn't. Out of the corner of his eye, Dave saw the posse piling off the ridge.

"Get out of my way, Hyde," he said coldly. "You can't beat me to a gun. There's no use trying."

"You got away from me once," Hyde retorted stubbornly. "You won't again if I can stop you. Give me that gun!"

Dave could hear the pounding of hoofs now, the cracking of mesquite as the first of the posse reached the foot of the hill. He dropped the reins and squared away from the horse, filled with a savage fury. "You're a fool if you think you can take my gun, Hyde. Try it!"

As Hyde clawed for his gun, Dave was drawing. The gun was coming level in his hand, hammer back, when a piercing scream from the woman stopped him cold.

"Johnny! Look out!"

All at once, without thinking, Dave knew. Hyde was standing between him and the door to the bunkhouse, and Johnny had gone there to look for horse-shoes. That kid who was a pretty good cowboy, who didn't know what it meant to be too quick with a gun. Dave saw him then, right behind the sheriff, right in line for any stray bullet.

With a rigid thumb Dave eased down the hammer on his gun and straightened up. He caught just a glimpse of a rusty horseshoe raised triumphantly. Then a stunning blow struck his chest. . . .

He awoke tired and heavy, conscious of a dull ache somewhere in his body. The first thing he saw was that rusty horseshoe, hanging on a nail at the top of the door casing.

"How are you feeling?" someone asked.

Dave was surprised at the effort required to turn his head, but he managed it

(Please continue on page 94)

RATTLER ON THE RANGE

By
FRANK BONHAM

*Drifter Cal Clary had to prove to the
old law-dog that his town sheltered
a sidewinder without rattlers.*



He poured a shot down the slope. . . .

CLARY and the marshal walked across the dark plaza with its concrete bandstand where the Mexican band played on Saturday nights. Their boots kicked through dead leaves as they left the plaza and approached the jail. It was two hours past midnight—a sinful hour in this border town of Mesilla.

Marshal Quill signaled Clary to a chair and turned up the wick of a lamp bracketed to the adobe wall, where a small armada of moths were testing an adage about a flame. Watching them, Clary thought, *You aren't any foolisher than a cowpuncher I know of, babies.*

At least he had been foolish up to tonight, but a few minutes ago at the Apache Saloon something had happened which would have a profound effect on the fu-

ture life of this cowpuncher, whose name was Cal Clary.

"Reason I asked you to come over," Quill said, "I thought you might be needing a job."

"Know of anything?"

A short, dogged-looking man of thirty with tough blond hair and brows, Quill frowned at the top of his desk. "Circle M needs a rider who knows broncs. You know broncs?"

"Better than I know how to pitch cards at a hat."

Quill shook his head in slow sympathy. "Why'd you do it?"

Clary's body slumped into the deep-bottomed rawhide chair. The heavy odors of the saloon were still in his head, the fatigue of six prosperous hours of poker

and one disastrous minute of pitching cards at a hat. "I was trying to find something out."

"What was that?"

"Whether two pair can ever beat three of a kind. They can't."

Not comprehending it, Quill presently drew a leaflet from his desk and laid it before him. "Well, about this job. It's the Tull place. Ulysses was a good circuit judge, but he's a damn' pore horse-rancher. Nobody can't make a living out of horses anyhow. He'll be in tomorrow. Hit him up for Ed Storr's job. Storr just quit."

"Thanks."

"And you might as well sleep in the cell, if you ain't proud. Nobody in it."

"A guy that just lost eight hundred dollars ain't proud." Clary started to rise, but Pete Quill said, clearing his throat,

"I can show you where to find five hundred dollars of that money you just lost." He put the leaflet, which was a dodger, into the horse-breaker's hands.

Clary glanced at him. The marshal had seemed ill-at-ease from the moment, in the saloon, when he had asked Cal to accompany him to his office. He seemed uncertain and sheepish, now.

The dodger had been untidily printed on an offset press. The face under a shouted line of type depicted a ruggedly-good-looking man with a mustache. The story was that five hundred dollars would be paid by an express company to anyone furnishing information leading to the capture of this man, who had robbed the Van Horn office of twenty thousand dollars two years ago. A cold finger of excitement crawled down his spine.

"He looks," he said, "like a man who'd be good at pitching cards."

"Oh, he is!" said Quill.

"Are you going to arrest him for card-pitching or larceny?"

Quill smiled. "I thought maybe I could get you to do the job for me."

Clary stopped to look the road over. It was unquestionably the rancher named Boyd Hyatt who had taken an evening's poker winnings from him in one short minute of sailing cards at a Stetson.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Is he greased lightning with a gun?"

"If he was, I could always come up behind him." Marshal Quill scratched in the tough fiber of his curly blond hair. "No, I—"

After a moment Clary got up. "Thanks, anyway, Marshall. I'll sleep down by the river. If you can't figger it out yourself, it's for sure I can't."

"Set down, set down!" Quill was blushing. "Judge Tull's got a girl, Cal. I haven't been riding over there every couple of weeks to talk to the judge. But Hyatt's sweet on her, too. I think he'd marry either Amy or the Judge to get himself another piece of land. He bought in two years ago. You guess what he used for cash! And he's crazy for land the way some fellers are for girls."

At first it looked as though the marshal were foolish to let such a chance get away from him. But on second consideration, Cal was amazed at Quill's perspicacity in foreseeing what would happen to Pete Quill's chances with Amy Tull if he turned Hyatt over to the Van Horn authorities. Women being as they were, it would only cement Amy Tull's affection for Hyatt if he were persecuted! He grunted.

Quill strode across the room and back.

"I've known about this for two weeks. When I saw you playing tonight, I thought—I'll bet that fellow could handle it. . . ! I couldn't turn this over to just anybody, Cal. And you being a newcomer here, it would seem logical if you was to remember him from someplace else. Say you spent two or three weeks working for Tull. Then you jumped Hyatt. We'll say you were suspicious and wrote to Van Horn, which you came through on the way up.

"It's simple, and you're five hundred ahead! When I saw you lose that whole pile, after being ahead all evening, I knew you were the man. Steady . . . and hard up."

Clary rolled the dodger into a tube and thoughtfully blew against it. It was the most superb set-up for revenge a man had ever stumbled into. But revenge was demeaning. Yet if, as he suspected, Boyd Hyatt had been pitching cards at a hat for a year, waiting for a prime lamb to shear, then only a Puritan's ethics would keep him from regarding this as an opportunity to recover what he had lost

through the man. It was a perfect set-up.

He said, "I need a job, all right. But I won't promise a thing. If the sign isn't right, I'll back out."

CLARY loafed around town all morning waiting for the Tulls. Affection began to grow between himself and this town of Mesilla. It lay on the bank of the Rio Grande, a day's ride above El Paso. It was a town of easy Mexican ways and no hurry. After a spring of trapping wild horses, he had arrived the afternoon before with four months' profits in his jeans. In one evening's poker play, he had blown it all.

It was not unusual. It was exceptional only in that he had begun the evening in a spirit of research as much as of speculation. Nearing thirty and suspicious of his luck, he had decided to put it all to a test: Cold sober, watching the cards and the odds like a miser, he had been tricked once again by his own inability to manage a card game like an investment.

Cal Clary was through, convinced at last that the only way was the slow way.

At ten o'clock, Marshal Quill appeared in his office door to signal him that the Tulls were coming.

A lean-wheeled buggy rattled up from the river and stopped on the blaze. Clary observed a lank, middle-aged man dismount after throwing out a bridle-anchor to hold the horses. He gave a hand to a girl in a yellow dress who stepped down beside him. Clary left his seat in the plaza. He was a tall man who moved with the cow-country grace which approached awkwardness. He was slender, his face sun-browned and grooved with weather-lines.

He wore a pony-skin vest and his plaid shirt-sleeves were too short, so that his hands looked overlarge but they looked capable.

He removed his hat. "Judge Tull?"

Tull's eyes were acidulous. His face was stringy with lines and he wore a cavalry mustache. "Yes."

"Marshal Quill says you need a good hand with horses. That could be me, if you can pay sixty and want to try me. My name's Clary."

He was acutely aware of the girl. You could not be unaware of her. She had the border's own colors, black hair and rich skin with a softness of cocoa in it, but her eyes were deep blue. She carried a parasol the same butter-yellow as her gown.

"Quill tell you what kind of horses we're raising?"

"No, but I reckoned they had a leg hanging down at each corner. I can handle all of that kind."

"They're trolley horses. I have a contract with a traction company in El Paso."

"You don't have to break them to anything but handling, though," the girl said. "Only we want someone who really knows horses, this time."

Judge Tull said with some severity, "This is my daughter, Amy, Clary."

"How do you do," the girl smiled. She offered her hand and Cal took it, thinking oddly of Marshal Quill as he noticed the brilliance of her smile.

Quill, he thought, *you'd never make the grade here anyway.*

"I'd like a try at it, Judge," he said.

"All right. We'll do some shopping and likely leave around three."

**BROKER
NO
JOKER**



EAST ST. LOUIS, Ill.—

"I mean it when I ask for Calvert," says Max Adelman, insurance broker of this city. "I switched to Calvert long ago, because I like its better taste. And with me it's the taste that counts."

The traffic was heterogeneous. Mexicans with *carretas* heaped with vegetables dripping from the river goaded their oxen to the stalls on the plaza. American ranchers swung dusty turn-outs past and now a horseman swerved to the walk and dismounted. He was a dark and smiling man, and as he came onto the boardwalk Cal recognized him. It was Boyd Hyatt, the rancher who had fleeced him.

Smiling, Hyatt said to the judge: "I declare, Judge, every color she puts on seems to be her own, eh?"

Tull growled. Not a man to brook frivolity, he asked: "What kind of commercial feed was that you mentioned the other day?"

Hyatt named it. "Can you remember that?" Judge Tull asked Cal.

"I can remember it," Cal said, "but I wouldn't feed it to any horse of mine."

There was a difficult instant of meeting Hyatt's gaze and not betraying himself. Hyatt's eyes were dark and accusatorily noticing, and he said with cautious good-nature:

"Fortunately, you don't have to." About forty, he had an aggressively-handsome face with a strong nose and prominent bone-ridges above his eyes. He did not exhibit the slightest guilt over fleecing Clary the night before.

"But you see he's going to work for us," Amy Tull said. "He's taking Ed Storr's job."

Hyatt moved his wide shoulders in a settling movement and stared at Cal. "Had any experience?"

Clary looked at the judge. "I'm getting all confused," he said. "Was it you I was going to work for, or Hyatt?"

The judge smiled. "Mr. Hyatt has been my right-hand-man in a pinch, once or twice. Well, I'll leave the matter of feed up to you. Order a month's supplementary feed for a hundred and fifty horses. Tell them who you are."

Hyatt downed his rebuke like a straight shot, too proud to blink. He smiled at the girl. "I'm right on the point of spending too much money on a team of blacks, Amy. Come along to the stable and tell me what you think of them."

Amy smilingly took his arm, and the judge said she should meet him at the buggy in an hour. Cal watched them stroll

down the walk. From the door of the jail, Marshal Quill watched sadly, turned, and went inside.

CIRCLE M ranch occupied a long strip of good bosky range and a large area of second-rate range on the mesa. Ancient cottonwoods, full of mistletoe and drifting bolls of fluff, held the river's moisture. Clary had a bed in the bunkhouse. Living was informal on the ranch. The judge's wife and Amy did the cooking and Clary and the two punchers ate at a long, oil-cloth-covered table in the kitchen.

Cal Clary spent four days inspecting the condition of the range and stock. On these rides Amy sometimes went with him, a gay and talkative companion. He had never known a girl quite like her. Boldness was in her, and yet propriety. When she joked about his loss to Hyatt, he thought he saw a hidden concern, and he tried to play himself up as less of a gambler than someone had made him appear to her.

"If I had the experience of some fellows," he said, "I reckon I'd be cleaning them, instead of them cleaning me."

"Why, Cal!" she laughed. "Boyd says he hardly ever plays."

"Hardly ever's all he needs to play."

Toward the end of his tour of inspection she asked him what he thought of the way her father was raising his trolley stock. "Do you think he'll ever make a living out of them?"

"If he'll make some changes."

"Heaven knows they're in order! We had to borrow money last year."

A wheel turned in Cal's head, as he thought of the quality of Hyatt's advice and its obvious results. "From the bank?" he asked.

Amy hesitated. "No. Not exactly."

At this point Cal Clary became certain that Hyatt's intentions toward Circle M, if not toward Amy, were something less than impeccable.

At supper under the fizzing carbide light that night, Judge Tull asked: "Well, do you see any possibilities in our little ranch?" He was a man to whom irony seemed indigenous.

"That's about all I do see."

"Naturally you'll want to change everything around," said Tull grimly.

Cal shrugged. "You'll have to decide whether you're raising cattle or horses one of these days. You haven't enough grass to raise both unless you feed the horses like you're doing. And that would skim off all your profit."

Amy seemed anxious to pacify the judge, whose face was purpling. "Perhaps," she ventured, "we could use cheaper feeds."

Cal said flatly, "Judge, if you'd take my advice you'd sell half the cattle and add a few horses. Quit compromising."

Color piled up in Tull's face, and then he said in metered anger: "What I really need a foreman for, Clary, is to carry out my wishes along the lines I select . . ."

Cal finished his coffee. "Sure." He pushed back his chair. "Any way you want it, Judge. I'll send somebody out from town. You can get that kind of ramrod for thirty dollars a month. For forty, you can get one that speaks English. I've been too busy learning about horses to learn much about how to take orders."

Amy gave him a look of hurt astonishment as he sauntered out. He was outside in the musty river-darkness when he realized why he had done it. He was backing out of his deal with Marshal Quill. He was right in line for the same kind of situation Quill was in, and he was squirming out while he could. You could not be with Amy Tull an hour without beginning to breathe a richer atmosphere than was good for a man.

Tull immediately followed him out, seeming astounded by the horse-breaker's attitude. "What makes you think you're a better rancher than I am?"

"The fact that you're losing money."

"You think you could do something to make things look more prosperous around here?"

"I couldn't make them look worse."

Tull scowled at him and then said, "All right. I'll raise you to seventy-five the day we show a profit." He went back to the ranch-house.

Twice in the first two weeks Boyd Hyatt visited the ranch. He exhibited, Cal thought, a proprietary air as he jogged into the yard—erect, nonchalant in swinging his big frame down and sauntering to the ranch house. On his second visit, the judge and Amy were in town when

he called. Hyatt came to the smithy, where Cal was shoeing a horse. He watched him clamp the horse's foreleg between his knees and begin to file.

Then he chuckled. "Why don't we get up a little game?"

"Horseshoes, maybe? Something else you've never played?"

Hyatt laughed and pulled a fold of bills from his pocket. "That was pretty raw," he admitted. "There's four hundred here, Cal. That's all you went into the game with, isn't it? All right, I'm going to give you a chance to get it back."

Cal did not look at Hyatt; he knew what was coming. "They've sheared this lamb for the last time," he said.

Hyatt's smile was surface deep. He was close and watchful and somehow in a hurry. "This is one you can't lose on. I'll bet four hundred you can't guess how many legs my horse has."

When Cal looked up, Hyatt tucked the money in his pocket. "And all you have to do is get on your horse and start riding."

"What makes me so poisonous as all that?"

"Let's say we disagree over how to raise horses. The last time I talked to Amy she wanted to know if I didn't know corn was too heatening a feed for this country. I'll be frank: I don't like that kind of competition."

Cal tossed the file onto the bench. "I meant it when I said I was through gambling. I've got a nice set-up here. I'd be a damned fool to leave."

HE DROPPED the money in Hyatt's coat pocket. Their eyes locked as he did so, and he saw Hyatt for the first time, measuring the intemperance of his desires, the headlong way of his emotions under the urbane front. Hyatt said: "I don't throw money around for nothing, Cal. I only put it out for things I really want."

"But some things aren't for sale," Cal said.

Hyatt's mouth tensed, and only by that sign and the faint drawing of an eyelid did he give himself away. "Then this is the only way to get the idea across." He stiffened like a flung whip and came viciously against Clary.

Cal caught his wrist and most of the

force of that belly-punch went into his leg. He held Hyatt's arm and jerked his head out of the way as Hyatt slugged. The fist grazed his ear. Off-balance, Hyatt came heavily against him.

Clary's shoulder hoisted him back. He swung stiffly at the rancher's face. The blow smacked. Hyatt stumbled, his mouth bleeding. He tried a roundhouse blow which Clary ducked. Cal smashed at his face again and opened a cut in his brow. He hit him in the belly and straightened him with a punch between the eyes. He let him have the edge of his knuckles on the mouth again and blocked Hyatt's attempt to surge back by hammering one solidly into his chin.

Hyatt staggered blindly into the corral bars and fell to his knees. Cal stepped quickly to him and plucked his Colt from the holster, emptied it and returned the gun before Boyd Hyatt was ready to rise.

Hyatt reeled up. He staggered to the horse-trough and loomed over it, dipping his face in the green water and letting it spill back. Cal brought his horse.

"Do what you want about coming back. I can keep my mouth shut if you can. It's a talent I learned in Texas."

Hyatt looked at him, a curious light flooding his face. Then he turned to mount. "I don't care where you're from, Clary. I'm more interested in where you're going . . . and when."

The following day Marshal Pete Quill paid a call. He drove a hired rig and wore yellow boots too tight for him. Leaving, he stopped on the road to talk to Cal, who was coming up from a bosky pasture. Quill looked flushed and unhappy. "If I could just wean her from that Hyatt . . . When you going to jump him?" he demanded.

"Any day now. Maybe the best way would be for you to just ask the girl."

"I don't want to start off wrong by being turned down."

"Funny thing," Cal said. "Hyatt offered me my money back to quit the job and drift."

Quill's brows puckered. "The devil! Say, you don't suppose—"

"Maybe. I tipped my hand a little after that just to see how he took it."

Quill's face turned copper-red. "Why, you damned fool! He'll kill you to shut

your mouth! Be careful with him."

Cal shook his head. "He may run. That's why I did it. It's possible we've got the wrong man. Or that he had a good reason for what he did. If we've got the wrong one, he's not going to get panicky. But if he takes off, I'll figure he's our 'possum. And I won't have to worry about what Miss Amy thinks about my turning him over to you."

Quill decided there was some logic in it, but asked in quick suspicion: "What do you care what she thinks?"

"This gets worse all the time, don't it?" Cal said wryly. "I'm in the same spot you are, Quill!"

Five days passed while he worked on. His pleasure in Amy's company was melancholy. She roused old dreams of making something of himself and someday marrying a girl like her, a girl whose own upbringing would elevate him, a judge's daughter or something.

On a morning of brassy heat, he brought six horses in from a back pasture. It was mid-afternoon when he turned them into the trap. He rode to the river, pulled off his shirt and washed up. As he was dressing, he heard someone coming down the bank. It was Amy, wearing a white shirt and jeans and carrying a bamboo fishing pole. She found a cottonwood log to sit on, baited the hook and tossed it in.

Cal threw a rock into the water and she jumped. He laughed and came along the bank. "What do you think you're going to catch there?"

"Channel cat. I can out-fish anybody on the place." When she tilted her head, the sunlight sifted like silver dust through her black hair.

"Some day I'll take you up on that."

She watched the brown current loaf past with a dappling of golden poplar leaves. "Speaking of sports, how did you get the bruise on your forehead?"

"There ought to be a lamp in the grain shed," Cal complained. "I ran into a pitchfork handle the other night."

"Was Boyd Hyatt holding it?" she asked with a sidelong smile.

"Suppose I told you he and I'd tangled?" Cal said.

"Suppose you did? I'd probably feel it was between the two of you. What did you fight over?"

"You."

Her brows went up; then she glanced at the water and said: "I can't wait to hear why."

"He thinks I'm trying to cut him out."

"How silly!"

"That's what I told him. I told him all I want here is to put the ranch on a paying basis and work myself into a good job."

He saw her surprised and displeased glance, but before she could turn away he took her hands. "And that's what I thought I wanted, at first."

Her eyes faltered. She put a hand on his arm as he came closer, but he took her by the waist and held her. "Let me say it, Amy. What I've needed was something to make me want to stop backing the long shots. I've got it now. Amy—"

HE WAS conscious of the moist vividness of her lips and the lustre of her eyes, blue as butterflies' wings, and then he was only conscious of holding her against him. Her mouth was a small, warm cameo under his. Abruptly she pulled away and the flat of her hand struck his cheeks. She ran up the bank.

Cal followed her and was there to turn the stirrup to her boot-toe. "I'm sorry, Amy. I guess we both had to do what we did."

"I'm sure I did."

He watched her ride away. It had been his old trouble again. Drawing to an inside straight.

In the morning he rolled his blankets. He drew his tasks out, uncertain what explanation to give the old man. There was no longer any purpose in his trying to stay. He had believed for a few days in a dream which the alarm clock of commonsense was certain to interrupt. But Amy had interrupted it herself even before this.

He felt no sense of disloyalty to Quill in quitting. He would ride back to Mesilla and lay this sorry bargain back on his desk.

A rider entered the yard. Cal saw Boyd Hyatt walking up the steps to the long porch. Hyatt was in the house for a half-hour. When he left, he did not look at the bunkhouse. He rode at a smart rack along the road to town.

Directly Judge Tull left the porch and crossed the pale blaze of the yard. Entering the bunkhouse, he stared gloomily at Cal before he let himself onto a cot. About him there was the dispirited air of an old gunfighter who has been disarmed in a fight with a stripling.

He said, "I don't suppose you knew I owe Hyatt some money."

"I don't think I did," Clary lied.

"I made it plain when I borrowed that he was to hold no strings whatever on my ranch. He's a great adviser, you know. Where I made my mistake was in not making enough money last year to meet the note. It's overdue."

The session in the ranchhouse had probably been fairly active. Hyatt was tactful, but how could you tell a man like Judge Tull that he must let his foreman go or be foreclosed on—and make it sound gracious?

"I don't know what the matter is between you and Hyatt," said Tull, "but that fight the other day brought it to a head. He told me today that your methods will ruin me. He says you've got to go or he'll call in the note."

"I guess that's it, then," Cal sighed.

"I'm afraid it is." Tull's eyes gleamed. "You really gave him a licking, eh? He told me that you're a dangerous character. Said you tried to kill him!"

"That's flattery. I wasn't half trying."

"He said for me to tell you that if you go through Mesilla today, to keep out of his way." Tull smiled bitterly.

Cal turned this in his mind. Maybe it was funny to the judge. It was not funny to him. The implication was as sinister as a cocked gun. Boyd Hyatt was laying a trap.

When he left Circle M a short time later, it was soberly, his carbine under his knee, slicker behind the saddle, bedroll diamond-hitched across his packhorse. Just before he left the ranchhouse behind, he turned.

On the porch stood Amy, a pale candle against the wall. He waved, but she did not reply. She stood utterly still, in an attitude of astonishment. Then he heard her call sharply:

"Dad!"

He was pleasantly astounded. Speculations zig-zagged through his head. He

thought of going back. On what basis? He'd been fired. And if there were a spark here worth blowing on, it must be done strategically, not by an unemployed cowpuncher. The solution to all the problems might lie between here and town.

ABOUT two miles west of the ranch the ground ran up into harscrabble hills tawny as a cougar. The wagon road followed a winding route through them. Clary held to the road only a short time. Then he drew off the trail and angled up the south side of the ridge.

The shadow of the horse hung straight down. The dust sifted upward. Spanish bayonet and creosote made the trail a winding one. For a half-hour he worked carefully along, now and then ascending afoot to the sawback ridge to glance down at the road. It was a lonely path used only by two ranches. Finally he saw what he had known he would find: A horse tethered in a little side-canyon.

In his mind, Hyatt would be going over it: Had he been too bald about telling Clary to keep out of his way? Was there a chance Clary had told anyone else of his suspicions? But afterwards he would ride hastily to Mesilla and tell Marshal Quill how the horsebreaker had caught up with him on the road, angry because he had forced Tull to discharge him.

At this point Cal's eyes found Hyatt sprawled between two rocks on the far side of the road.

Cal took his time about working down. First he paced another quarter-mile westward, to get beyond the rancher. Then, stride by stride, he descended through layers of heat lying like smoke in the pass. He wanted Hyatt to be thoroughly baked by the time he discovered his quarry. The dry ground tended to come apart and send small, clattering avalanches downward. But each time Cal came in sight of Hyatt, the rancher was another hundred yards closer. It was a long pistol-shot, now.

He advanced more swiftly, the stock of the Remington squeezed against his ribs. Beyond the next tangle of dusty creosote brush he would be in full sight.

He walked quickly through the creosote. In the instant of striding out he heard a

thin dry rattle at his feet. He saw the strike of the sand-rattler as a brief brown blur. In pure shock, he leaped sideways and fired.

Hyatt's shot came a split-second later, but Cal had thrown himself down. The bullet exploded in the grit at his side. He saw the severed halves of the rattlesnake flipping through the brush. He looked for Hyatt, but the rancher had disappeared. Frantically Cal looked about for shelter. There was nothing within twenty-five feet. He lay still, watching.

Movement drew his gaze to a split rock. A glint of metal disappeared suddenly in a light haze of powder-smoke. Coolness was behind the bullet: It tore Clary's forearm with a shock that could not be called pain. It was a stab of sensation and a following numbness, as incredible as the blood smearing his sleeve. He saw the clear scarlet of his blood pulsing out of him and began to gouge at his upper arm with his thumb, searching for the blood vessel. Then he heard a bright clink of metal as an ejected cartridge fell. The sound caused him to crouch against the earth and search for Hyatt through the sights. His shot went off unexpectedly. The ball sang six feet above Boyd Hyatt's head; yet the smashing thunder of it flattened the man.

Cal started to crawl back to the spiny creosote tangle. Then he saw Hyatt rise again, and he stopped and hunched around to cover him. He felt in numbing terror the steady pumping of blood from his arm. If Hyatt could see him at all, he would know he was bleeding to death; that he need only keep him busy and nature would take care of everything.

Cal bunched his jaw muscles against the gunstock and watched the rocks for Hyatt. But when the man came into view, he had moved twenty feet. He poured a shot up the slope which passed just over Cal's head. Twisting to catch him, Clary let his shot go too soon and it howled from a rock.

Cal sobbed, choking on the impotence of his fury and fear. He jacked up another shell. Heat waves shimmered about him, drowning him in opalescent numbness. Hyatt's gun cracked again. The shot froze him. Yet this time there was no sting to the report. It sounded like a

smaller calibre gun, and when he looked down he saw Hyatt's head turn quizzically down-canyon. Cal followed his line-of-sight.

From his vantage, he could see what the rancher could not: the form of Amy Tull kneeling behind the rocks at a turn. She waved at Cal and fired her small-calibre saddle-gun in the general direction of Boyd Hyatt. It raised dust not far before him. Hyatt lay there a moment longer, seeming to weigh it. He was at the peak of a triangle. Suddenly he went at a crouching run toward his waiting horse.

Coolness returned to Cal, steadiness dwelt in his arms and he notched the blade of the front sight in the pattern of the leaf. Hyatt's shirt was a pale blotch weaving beyond the tip of the gun. The kick of it shook Cal. He lowered it and now he saw Hyatt stumble to his knees, rise again but once more fall forward. He rolled slowly a short distance down the steep hillside.

"We always thought there was something wrong about him," Amy said. As they rode toward town, he held the reins in his right hand and kept a handkerchief twisted about his arm with the other. The wound was a deep trough up his forearm.

"He had cash when he came in, and he never haggled about the price at all. He

paid twice what the land and cattle were worth. Then he began giving everybody else advice. Dad used to accept it, until he discovered Hyatt knew less about cattle than he did."

Cal gazed at her. "Pete Quill was all wrong."

"About what?"

"Women. You're supposed to throw a crying fit and tell me you never want to see me again, because of what I did to Hyatt."

She kept her face turned ahead, but he watched the line of her mouth soften. "That's why I came after you—to tell you just that. I've got no use for a man who takes a girl up on everything she says. I was so mad when I saw you going away without telling me good-bye that I had to come along to tell you what I thought of such a man."

"Then how am I going to know when you mean what you say and when you don't?"

"When I say something I mean," Amy told him, "you'll know it. But I'm more apt most of the time to mean 'yes' than 'no,' I suppose."

It was a good operating principle, Cal reckoned. Better even than never drawing to an inside straight. It was still a form of gambling, perhaps, but even losing could be pleasant.

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TROUBLE-SHOOTIN' STRANGER

By
**HAPSBURG
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● ● ●

THE ROAD was lined with tall chaparral and so crooked that Rell Brennan couldn't see the sandy ruts a hundred yards ahead. Deep silence lent the place a certain eeriness. Brennan was not much surprised when he turned a hair-pin bend and overtook a lone bloody-shirted man reeling in his saddle. At once he kicked his sorrel cow horse up near the unknown's paint pony, and said quickly:

"Look to be hurt right bad, amigo. Can I help?"



From under the bed clothes
Idaho swept a short-barreled
shotgun.

Could three dead men smoke out the Buckshot Buckaroo?

As young as Rell, the wounded man was, though his build ran to stockiness while Rell stood just under six feet and was wolf-lean.

"Doctor—town couple miles—" the unknown muttered.

He crumpled, rag-limp. Brennan caught him and drew him over to the front of his saddle and rode on.

Sun City was an average cow town. A half-dozen loafers went with the two newcomers to the Main street office of old Dr. Elbert Johns, and three of them carried the still rag-limp figure in. Rell Brennan dismounted, straightened his gun-belt, stretched the saddle stiffness from his legs, then was talking with a lank, grizzled man who wore a law star.

"I'm Sheriff Sid Arnett, cowboy," the officer began. "We're particular about strangers here. Reckon you won't mind telling who you are, where you're from and what you're doing here, and how come you bringing Bud Starn in. Am I correct?"

"Plumb," Brennan said. He gave his name, told the little he knew concerning the man he'd picked up, and proceeded: "I'm from Shootin' Creek, Chunky Gal Mountain country, state of New Mex. The cow outfit I worked for was sold, and I'm over here lookin' for a rider job. Happen to know of anything?"

Sid Arnett appeared to be satisfied. He said, "That puncher you brought in, he rode for the Bar M. They might take you on where he left off. And Duncan Veach's big V Quarter-circle, known mostly as the Cup and Saucer, always needs cowhands. Veach is mean to work for though. Also, I ought to tell you that the Bar M, the Morgan outfit, is owned and run by a woman."

There were, of course, range riders who disliked a boss in skirts. Then the Sun City sheriff was nudging Rell Brennan slyly and saying under his breath:

"Here's Dunc Veach coming now. The jigger riding with him is Ide Kellar, who more than once has been called Dunc's pet rattlesnake. Ide is the keenest hombre with a six-shooter I ever saw. He's from tidewater Texas. But claims he's from Idaho."

Veach was in his late forties, angular and sallow, had a thin, hard mouth.

Kellar, dark and wiry, was much younger than his employer; he had eyes that seemed never fully open, yet apparently saw all there was to see. The owner of the Cup and Saucer stepped out of a fine Myres saddle on a fine black horse and from Sid Arnett wanted to know bluntly what the hell was going on in this man's town.

The lawman told him. A moment, and the bespectacled old doctor came to his street door and spoke in a voice filled with wrathful indignation:

"Starn just died, men. Had some big double-O buck in him; a wonder he lived so long; and he's the third to go this same way! You, Sid: can't you do anything to stop that murderous so-called buckshot buckaroo?"

The mysterious killer had worn the clothing of a cowboy. He'd been seen twice, but dimly.

"Doc, I agree with you," the sheriff said, "that it's the lowdownest, cowardliest thing I ever heard of—shooting them all *in the back* with heavy double-O buckshot out of a big-bore shotgun. He takes no chance at all himself. Never leaves a sign. Nothing to point him out. Well... do I hear any suggestions?"

Rell Brennan said, "Might be the jigger uses a shotgun that way because he's a bum shot with a six-shooter. I claim this is somethin' to think about. One thing, anyway."

There was silence. Rell saw that the slitted eyes of Idaho Kellar were hard upon him. Then Kellar opened his lips to let out just two words of comment:

"Smart cowboy."

There was, unmistakably, a faint mocking echo in the voice of this man who more than once had been called a pet rattlesnake. Grizzled Sid Arnett walked off with his worried gaze thoughtfully downward. The cowboy stranger followed, leading his horse, presently overtaking Arnett and saying in undertones:

"I don't cotton to the looks of Veach and Kellar, Sheriff, so if you'll tell me where the Bar M outfit is, I'll ride that way. Cur'osity prods me to inquire who the other two was that the buckshot killer cut down—if you don't mind?"

Arnett gave him riding directions for Bar M headquarters, and continued, "Of

course you'll notify 'em of the luck Bud Starn had. As for the other two, you'll hear all about that where you're goin'.

Adios, cowboy."

Brennan got into his saddle and rode.

AN HOUR later he was on Morgan range. It was good range, but with not nearly enough cattle. The Morgan buildings were old and run down. The woman who came to the front gallery in response to his halloo was young, slim, and handsome despite the look of deep heart weariness that lay over her countenance. Rell took off his dusty, rumpled Stetson hat.

"Afternoon, ma'am. The name is Rella-ford Brennan, and I'm from the Chunky Gal Mountain country, Shootin' Creek section, state of New Mexico," he said in the manner of one who states the simplest facts, and went on to deliver the bad news he had brought. For a moment he thought the girl hadn't heard. Then he noted her sudden pallor. When she spoke, it was as though she addressed a friend, not an utter stranger:

"A year ago my dad was killed in that same brutal fashion. Our foreman met the same fate only a few months back. And now poor Bud Starn. I can think of but one reason for killing Starn and the foreman: that they'd somehow found out who shot my dad, and were killed to keep their mouths shut!"

"If your sheriff could figure it smart like that—" Rell muttered. "You suspicion anybody?"

"Oh, yes, and so does Sidney Arnett," Bess Morgan said promptly, "but it seems that there's no way on earth for us to get proof that would stand up in law court."

She turned toward one end of the gallery as though she were through talking about it. He asked for range work, and was told to see the boys when they came in; the outfit had no foreman now. The girl went around to the back with him, and at her request he caught out and saddled a bay gelding.

When she had ridden toward for the purpose of looking after a cowboy's funeral, Brennan watered and fed his sorrel cow horse. Then he proceeded to work himself into the good graces of the old

bunkhouse cook. Experience had taught Rell that bunkhouse cooks always knew things.

In no time this one was telling the tall, lean young man from New Mexico:

"Good while back, Miss Bess's pa, Ben Morgan, him and Dunc Veach they got het up over a big oil strike in tidewater Texas and lit out for it. Ben'd sold half his cattle to finance hisself, which put the Bar M in hard lines and it's still in hard lines.

"Well, Veach he comes home with a forchune, but old Ben is both sick and broke when he gits in. And Ben Morgan, he won't talk. Jest sets and broods. Then one day he sneaks out and rides off, and comes back dyin' in his saddle, which was that damned buckshot buckaroo's fust killin'.

"We figgered that Veach had somehow skun old Ben so bad in the oil deal that Ben was 'shamed to tell it. He'd walk off at mention o' Veach's name. We figgered he'd been to the Cup after his rights, whatever they was, the evenin' he was shot, 'cause he rode in from that direction. All Sid Arnett could find out was that Dunc Veach's right-hand man, Ide Kellar, was with him and Ben in Texas. Dunc and Ide has tuck to quarrelin' a heap lately, 'cordin' to the grapevine."

"Grapevine's important if you know how to take it," said Brennan. "Arnett told me that Kellar was a whiz with a six-shooter, so it oughtn't to be him that uses a shotgun with buck in it. . . ."

He sat down on a bench against the outer front wall of the Bar M bunkhouse and put his head to working hard.

Time passed. The yellowing sun started burning, a notch in the fringe of scrub along the top of the nearest ridge west. Then Bess Morgan came riding in with lank, grizzled Sheriff Sid Arnett. They dismounted and dropped reins and walked toward Rell Brennan, who rose and bared his head. The girl spoke:

"Cowboy, Sid is going to offer you work that's dangerous, so dangerous that you may find yourself the so-called buckshot buckaroo's fourth victim if you take it. I'm making sure you know."

Rell smiled at her. She tried to smile back. It occurred to him that he'd never seen a girl so attractive. He said:

"You, Sheriff. A stranger, I'm the proper somebody to get a range job on the Cup and see what I can dig up about that murder business when nobody's lookin', so to speak. It's this that you've got up your sleeve, ain't it?"

"Exactly." Arnett grinned. "Idaho Kellar, in town, called you a smart cowboy and I hope he's right. Er, Miss Bess has some good ideas. What if Veach and Kellar, she says, each has got enough on the other to hang him—we know what happened here, she says, but don't know what happened in Texas. She thinks that this, backed by Veach's scads of money, might be a combination the U. S. Army couldn't beat. Best thing on earth to beat it with, she says, is a heap of really keen brainwork. Eh?"

"Correct," Rell said. He could have told Arnett that all this had been in his mind for an hour or so.

A little later, while the three of them were at supper in the ranch house dining room, Rell outlined a plan of action he'd been building. . . .

THE night was two hours old when the Sun City sheriff and Brennan reined to a halt in thick darkness half a mile from Cup headquarters. They were to separate here. Rell muttered, "Are you dead sure there's no womenfolks at Dunc Veach's?"

"Dead sure," echoed Sid Arnett. "Dunc never married. It's been said that the gals he wanted he couldn't get, and the gals he could get the devil wouldn't have. Nobody stays in the big house but Veach, Kellar, and the Chinese cook. Bunkhouse is a couple hundred yards beyond. Twenty in the range crew, all as tough as a boot. But I count on doing what we aim to do before they have a chance to spoil anything. Well—cuidao, amigo!"

"Cuidao yourself!" Brennan threw back, half whispering.

He rode off toward the sprawling big ranch house, the front of which was lighted by opal-shaded large oil lamps. There was a hitch-rail near the front gallery steps, and here the cowboy newcomer dismounted and tied.

He hallooed. A voice from within ordered him, rather than invited him, to enter, and he did so.

No expense had been spared in furnishing this spacious living room, but everything was garish. Duncan Veach and Idaho Kellar sat deep in plush, glaring at each other. They'd been drinking. Brennan remembered the old Bar M cook's grapevine report that Dunc and Ide had taken to quarreling; Sid Arnett, also, had mentioned it; and Bess Morgan had suggested that living with one's Frankenstein *must* be a severe trial.

Suddenly Veach sat up and barked, "What do you want?"

"How about a range job?" accompanied by an easy grin.

"Who are you? Where you from?"

"Rell Brennan. Shootin' Creek, Chunky Gal Mountain country, state of Nuevy Mex. Top hand if I do say it myself."

"It was you," Veach half snarled, "brought the Starn hombre in to Doc Johns."

"He picked Starn up on the road, Dunc," ill-humoredly said Kellar. His narrowed eyes were glittering. "One o' the town loafers told you that. And what the hell if he did or didn't?"

Veach rose. Not sallow now; he was mad, and there was the flush of alcohol besides. "Look, Idaho. I'm going to bed. I want you to go, too." He faced Rell Brennan. "You, Shootin' Creek, stick around and we'll put you to riding Cup tomorrow."

He went to the hallway that divided the sprawling big house, turned into his bedroom and closed the door. Kellar's room was on the other side, farther down. Rell followed Kellar, stepped in ahead of him and lighted a lamp on the dresser. A six-shooter holstered to a cartridge-belt lay on the bed. Idaho reached for the ensemble, but Brennan was quicker; he dropped it from the nearby open window, and it struck the side-gallery floor with a dull clatter. After an upward hitch of his own gun-belt:

"Sure was an unlucky day for you, Ide," said he, voice low, "when you tied yourself so tight to Dunc—wasn't it?"

Veach's pet rattlesnake sat down on the bed, near the pillows. Also low-voiced, he said, "Are you loco enough to think I don't know what brought you here?"

Brennan fastened his gaze on a point midway between the other's narrowed

eyes. He knew that the trick had a hypnotic effect in nine cases out of ten; looking a man down hurt more than knocking him down. Although alcohol had Idaho Kellar's nerves in poor shape, Idaho withstood the drilling stare for a long, silent minute. Then he lost the queer battle. His breath came hard as he yammered: "You—you've not got me fooled one little bit—you're a lawdog!"

Some helpless rage tinged with desperation in that. Rell smiled faintly. His gaze had not left the bridge of Ide Kellar's nose. He spoke then in tones strangely, dangerously soft.

"Ide, Starn was alive when I found him. And did he know plenty! He'd been dry-gulched for the same reason that the Bar M range boss was—to keep him from telling what he'd found out. Ben Morgan was so ashamed of bein' skinned so bad in the oil deal that he wouldn't even talk about it. Then he threatened to sue Veach for the sake of his girl, who'd been nearly goin' broke with the ranch ever since he sold half the cows to finance him in Texas. Old Ben was killed mostly to keep Veach from havin' to fight him through a lawsuit, because there was a big chance the court'd decide in old Ben's favor even with the slim proof."

NONE of it had been guesswork. All that wasn't established fact was cold logic. Satisfied with the effect his words had upon Ide Kellar, Rell Brennan continued:

"Cowardly buckshot buckaroo dry-gulcher, shot three men in the back, disgrace to all the other vaqueros. Expert with a six-shooter and counted on that as a sort o' alibi. The blame, of course, is as much Dunc Veach's as yours. But when it comes to court, who d'you think will have the whole, complete, and entire blame? You, that's who. Y-O-U!"

Kellar's ragged nerves, his latest quarrel with Dunc, with the over-lying fear that Bud Starn had lived to tell, drove him into a mood for anything. He was now all but frothing at the mouth. Suddenly then his eyes snapped wide.

Dunc Veach had stepped into the room. "What do y'want?" rapped Kellar. Dunc's lean face was yellowish white

and somehow ghastly. He did not answer. From under the bedclothes Idaho Kellar swept a short-barreled, big-bore shotgun loaded with double-O buck, and in that same brief space of time a heavy six-shooter appeared in the right hand of Duncan Veach. The two weapons exploded in a single thunderous blast. The two men crumpled to the floor and lay there quite still.

It was the voice of the Sun City sheriff that stopped men from the Cup range crew when they came running to find out what had happened. . . .

"You see," Rell Brennan told the Morgan girl the next day—he had just ridden in from town—"You see, my idea was for Sid Arnett to work on Veach while I worked on Kellar, tryin' to get 'em so poison mad at each other that what we wanted to know would be squeezed out somewhere. It was a tough job. Kellar did confess, but only when he was dyin'. Veach was already gone. That OO buck, y'know."

"Yes. His Frankenstein killed him," said Bess Morgan.

Brennan took it from her:

"Can't be beat. Any damages you sue Veach's estate for, you're sure to get, the judge said. There in Texas, Dunc had sworn to your dad that the oil well was a dry hole. He gave old Ben expenses back home, and made him think it was charity! And before your dad was half-way back Dunc finished the well and then sold everything for seventy-thousand and cash!"

"I'll sue for exactly half that, Rella-ford," the girl said. "My daddy's life, and the lives of Starn and the range boss, were above price. And I'm going to pay you—"

Again Brennan took it from her. "Rather have the range boss job here on the Bar M if it's all the same to you, ma'am." He smiled at her. "I can see though, inside a year I'd start pesterin' you pretty bad, tryin' to get you to marry me. I'm warnin' you now, ma'am!"

She smiled. The set look of deep heart weariness was beginning to fade out of her countenance. "As of this date, Rella-ford," she told him, "the range boss job is yours."

next

Published

10 STORY
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January 11th

Howdy, Folks! . . . There's a big trigger treat waiting for you in our next issue— "The King of the Ciboleros" by Robert Trimmell—a bang-up thriller about buffalo hunters pitted against a deadly syndicate of land-hungry gunmen. So, ride close, and we'll tell you about the story.



Closing the deal with the King of the Ciboleros, Jeff Hall turned and spotted a crouched figure aiming a six-shooter at Don Rafael. Jeff blasted and heard the bushwhacker scream.



The following night a wild rider charged into the ciboleros' encampment. Someone yelled, "He's trying to kill Don Rafael!" Jeff sprang into action and yanked the rider from the saddle.



"Stand still or I'll blow yer spine in half!" growled a voice behind Jeff who was attempting a getaway from the killer's camp to warn the ciboleros of a new attack.



"Jeff," Lola screamed. Like lightning a buffalo lance ripped through the air, barely missing him. The murder-bound syndicate was closing in! The complete story will be in the February issue.

GUN-BLUFF BUYS A

*There was no escape for John Humberson—unless he sealed
his death warrant in blood-red ink.*



SHALLOW GRAVE

By
JAMES SHAFFER

*Epic Novelette of Printer's Ink
and Powder Smoke*

CHAPTER

Trail of Terror

1

He awoke and stared for a moment at the unfamiliar ceiling above him. Then remembrance came, and with it a driving urgency. He started out of bed in a hurry, and was brought up short by the stiff soreness in his body.

The outward marks of the beating were gone, but the inward soreness was still there. But it was less than it had been the



"I'm not taking the train for
Omaha. I'm not taking the train
anywhere—I!"

day before, and in time, it too, would disappear. There would be nothing to remind him of it then. Nothing but his memory of it.

But he shook off such a thought and snatched his clothes from the chair. In doing so, he forgot the gun, and it slid out of a pocket and hit the bare floor boards with a harsh, dry clatter. He picked it up hurriedly, as if trying to ignore it completely.

For the gun seemed to be a symbol of this cruel, harsh land, a land he was leaving and intended to forget. Even so, from force of habit, he didn't leave the gun in the room, but shoved it in his hip pocket where he always carried it.

Remembering Natalie, he dressed with usual care, left his room and walked lightly down the hall of the hotel.

He knocked and entered when she opened the door.

"How're you feeling?"

"Fine," Natalie said. "I feel great. You go get the tickets for the eleven o'clock train, and I'll get packed while you're gone."

John Humberson looked at her for a long while, noticing her face. A nice face—a really beautiful face, with its high molded forehead, its finely chiseled nose and its gay lilting mouth. And the whole set off by a pair of pale violet eyes.

He remembered the shock that had run through him when he'd first discovered that face in the rough, tough gold camp of Ten Strike. It was like finding a fragrant and fragile flower in a weed patch. Only it was doing Dirk Matson a favor to compare his hony-tonk with a weed patch. Even the worst kind of weed would wither and die in such an atmosphere.

"Remember, we can't stay in Boulder for very long!" she said urgently. "We can't afford to take that chance!"

She colored with embarrassment as soon as the words were out, but there was no need for explanations. She had voiced the thing that lay in the back of both their minds. The thing that was ever-present with both of them, and yet neither wanted to acknowledge.

It had been their constant companion since the swift flight from Ten Strike, and it hovered over them.

Without moving, he could feel the dull

aches that still existed in his body from the beating he'd taken. And the gun in his pocket suddenly seemed to burn like a red hot iron. It burned as if it were almost too hot for him to touch. He remembered the gun had been in that same hip pocket, within easy reach when those big fists had flailed him.

And then he remembered the fists; how they had seemed to ram at him from out of nowhere, but always unerringly finding their mark. He remembered the pain that had lanced through his slight body as they landed, and the nausea that had gripped him when he no longer had the strength to stand before them. Yes, there was the memory of the beating—urging him to be on their way. Out of the reach of those fists.

Suddenly Natalie grabbed his arm as he started to turn away.

"John, I didn't want to tell you this—didn't want you to worry. But—we've got to leave Boulder today. Now!"

She pointed. From the window, they could see a whole block of Boulder's teeming main street. The hotel was a block and a half from the railroad station, and directly across the street was the town's biggest saloon.

Already the street below was choked with traffic; empty wagons moving toward the freight depot, wagons creaking and groaning under their loads moving the other way. For this was railroad. The nearest rail point to the gold mine camps back in the mountains. And also the place where you could get a train for the east.

John Humberson didn't have to follow Natalie's pointing finger to know what had drawn her attention across the street. It was a horse, tied to the hitching rail in front of the saloon. A paint pony, with a curious marking on its left front leg, and another on its rump.

"That's Little Mick's horse, John," she said. "I'd know it if I saw it ten years from now. Little Mick's in town—and that means that Dirk Matson will be here soon. Don't you see? There's a telegraph line from Boulder to Goldfield. And it's only ten miles from Goldfield to Ten Strike. The minute Little Mick sees us Dirk Matson will know where we are within an hour. And an eight hour ride on a fast horse—"

He knew all those things. Knew them better than she did, because he'd thought about them more. A man could get from Ten Strike to Boulder in six hours if he had a relay of fast horses on the way. And Dirk Matson was the type of man who could arrange for such a relay. And he had the stamina to ride a couple of horses to death in order to get what he wanted.

He knew, too, that there was grim truth in what she said. Boulder was a teeming city, with thousands passing through each week. But there would be plenty of people who would remember seeing the Eastern dude and the girl who'd gotten to town two days before. It wouldn't take Little Mick long to pick up their trail. Then a quick trip to the telegraph office, and within an hour, Dirk Matson would know their whereabouts.

"It's nine-thirty, John. An hour and a half before train time. You get the tickets and come back for me. I'll be ready to go by then. I promise you."

He kissed her and said, "I'll be back for you."

He let himself into the hallway, heard her cross the room and turn the key in the lock, and then went down into the lobby.

The upper floors of the hotel were almost deserted. Most people got up for an early start in Boulder. But the lobby was jam-packed with people. He paused at the turn of the stairway, while his eyes shuttled over the crowd below, looking for a short man whose left shoulder drooped slightly.

But Little Mick wasn't in the crowd below. He was probably, John told himself, still in the saloon. Drinking up after his long ride. He descended the rest of the stairs and started shoving his way to the street door.

"Just a minute, sir." Someone touched his arm. Humberson turned with a feeling of annoyance at being stopped. But the big, florid-faced man who'd stopped him was smiling broadly.

"Kessel's the name, sir. Kessel." He proffered a fat, limp hand. "You were pointed out to me as John Humberson. Editor and owner of the Ten Strike *Clarion*."

"Pointed out." The two words cut through the feeling of safety he'd been

building up; cut clear through and into the inner core of his fear. He'd no idea that he was known in Boulder.

A chill went through him, and he felt the palms of his hands grow clammy and cold. Little Mick's job of finding him wouldn't be so hard after all.

"...only paper printed in the gold fields, I understand," Kessel rambled on. "And the *Clarion* is distributed in all five of the gold camps. That'll simplify my advertising campaign, sir. Simplify it greatly."

What was the man gabbling about? Humberson's annoyance must have flashed on his face, because Kessel came right to the point.

"I manage a theatrical group, sir. Kessel's Thespians. We intend to play all the gold camps. We have our tent theatre, and I want to advertise in your paper, Mr. Humberson. A full column ad to run for about three weeks—"

Full column ad for a traveling tent show, Humberson thought, and without thinking, his mind reverted to its newspaper training. A nice bit of business; a nice chunk of revenue for the paper. His mind ran on for a moment till it reached the blank wall of reality.

"Sorry," he said curtly. "You've got the wrong man."

"Wrong man—but sir! You *are* Humberson, aren't you?"

"I'm Humberson, all right," he snapped back. "But I no longer own the *Clarion*—"

"Then—uh—you could give me the name of the present owner—your successor—?"

He thought of the little print shop the way it had looked the last time he'd seen it. The hand press—the latest thing back east—lay on its side. The neat cases of type were neat no longer. They were scattered around the room, and his boots had crunched on the scattered type as he'd crossed the floor for the last time.

"Present owner?" he ground out. "Why, Dirk Matson, I guess. I'm sure I don't know. And now, if you'll pardon me, I've got business to attend to."

He stepped around the man and worked his way through the crowded lobby, remembering the look of blank surprise on the florid man's face. He'd just reached the door when he heard the man loudly

questioning the hotel clerk as to where he could find Dirk Matson, present owner and publisher of the *Ten Strike Clarion*. The clerk was expressing surprise at this; he'd heard nothing about Dirk Matson publishing a newspaper. Dirk Matson, the clerk was saying, was too busy a man to fool around with a lot of ink and type. Dirk Matson was a big man up in the gold fields.

There was no side door to the hotel. Only one way out, and that through the front door and right out onto the street. He shot a quick glance through the heavy traffic: saw Little Mick's horse still hip shot at the hitching rail in front of the saloon, and turned east toward the railroad station.

CHAPTER

2

Tickets for Two

He stood on the edge of the sidewalk, across the street from the depot, and let the crowd jostle him a few minutes, before stepping into the dust of the street and darting through the steady stream of wagons to the depot platform.

Humberson flung away his half finished cigar and moved up to the deserted ticket window.

"Two tickets for Omaha," he said. Omaha would be far enough for the first leg of the journey. There would be a comfortable five hundred miles or more between them and Dirk Matson.

"Better make that just one ticket to Omaha, Humberson."

He whirled around, upsetting the neat pile of gold coins he'd stacked on the counter. They made loud ringing sounds as they hit the hard floor and rolled away. The clerk, hard pressed for time and short tempered because of it, swore loudly and turned from the window to check some waybills.

"I'll write your tickets when you pick up your money, mister."

"Thank you," Humberson said mechanically, but he didn't bend down to pick up the coins. His eyes settled on Little Mick, and it was hard to jerk them away.

Little Mick rested his full weight on his left leg. A hip shot stance—just like a horse, John thought. It shoved his right

hip outward, and brought the big butt of his sixgun into full prominence. Little Mick didn't miss much of being a dwarf, but that gun on his hip made him equal to any man.

He shuddered and started to pick up the coins from the floor. Little Mick walked forward and his boot toe scattered the money from under Humberson's fingers.

"There's enough left on the counter for one ticket, Humberson," Little Mick said in that flat, toneless voice of his. "And you ain't buying but one ticket, remember?"

Anger flushed through Humberson like a muddy torrent.

"You don't think you can get away with this, do you?" he flared.

"Don't know what you're talking about mister," Little Mick grinned faintly. "I'm just taking orders from Dirk. He told me to see that you didn't buy but one ticket on the eastbound train."

"That's what I'm talking about," Humberson rapped out. "Who does Matson think he is? If Natalie wants to go east with me—Matson can't stop her!"

"Can't he?"

"No—this is a civilized country. Matson can't get away with what he's trying to pull."

"And who's gonna stop him?" Little Mick asked quietly.

Humberson looked around wildly. There were a dozen people within hearing distance. The ticket clerk, two baggage handlers and eight or ten loungers. But the ticket clerk was busy checking waybills, the baggage men were idly examining the tags on the luggage, and the loungers were having a spirited discussion about the speed of trains.

"Looks like everybody's a little too busy to pay any attention to your troubles, Humberson," Little Mick said. "I reckon they got troubles of their own, too."

Humberson felt again that dull feeling of despair. It was a feeling that he knew only too well. He remembered those stirring editorials he'd been so proud of back in *Ten Strike*. He'd called on the town to cleanse itself; to run such men as Dirk Matson and his crooked gamblers out of town.

He remembered being stopped on the street by people who'd never seen him be-

fore; and being congratulated about his guts in writing such pieces. He'd felt powerful that night. He'd rolled that phrase "the power of the press" around in his mind, liking the sound of it, and feeling the power of his mind, liking the sound of it, and feeling the power of his words to stir people.

Only it had been a hollow mockery. There'd been nothing. Nothing but his own fists trying to ward off those crushing blows of Dirk Matson. And the people who'd slapped him on the back; who'd complimented him for his courage in telling the truth about Matson—had stood silently by. Mute and silent they'd seen Dirk Matson beat him. They'd seen Matson and his men wreck his print shop, and leave him lying in the gutter in front of it. And ten minutes later, that same crowd was in Dirk's honky-tonk, lapping up Matson's liquor, and shoving their gold across his crooked tables.

"Natalie's going with me," Humberson said. "We're going to be married."

"Dirk gets awfully sore when somebody interferes with his love-making," Little Mick said. "You know how Dirk is. He gets all worked up over some gal, and he just won't stand for nobody taking her away from him."

"Yes," Humberson said bitterly. "I know how Dirk Matson treats his women. Nice—till another pretty face comes along."

"What's the use of arguing about it?" Little Mick muttered. "Personally, I like Natalie. She's a nice kid and she's a good-looker. But Dirk's got his eye on her and that's that."

"She's no honky-tonk singer," Hum-

berson growled, controlling his temper.

"Course she ain't," Little Mick agreed readily. "She and her brother was doing all right in their store—till Dirk took a fancy to her. He tried to play it straight, but Natalie wouldn't have nothing to do with him." Little Mick rolled a cigarette, stuck it between his thin, traplike lips and touched a match to it.

"In a way, it's the girl's own fault that she wound up singing in Dirk's place. If she'd been nice to him, she and her brother would still have their store. But she snooted Dirk when he tried to get friendly. So—"

He left the rest hanging in the air, and it took a moment for it to hit John Humberson. Then realization hit him like a solid blow in the stomach, sending a sickish feeling through him. He licked his suddenly-dry lips, remembering.

Natalie's brother had been killed by a run-away horse. He tried to shake the thought off, but they poured in on his mind like a broken dam. Natalie's surprise when she found the mortgage on the store. And her subsequent loss of the store to the man who held the mortgage—Dirk Matson.

And then the job she'd gotten in the Chinese restaurant—and the restaurant going out of business suddenly. The other jobs she'd tried to get and finally in desperation, the job singing in Matson's place.

He was conscious that Little Mick was watching him carefully, and he must have read his thoughts, because the little gunman smiled faintly.

"Yeah, it was like that. Y' see, tenderfoot, Dirk Matson has a way of getting



OYSTERMAN FINDS REAL PEARL!

AMAGANSETT, N. Y.—Capt. Ted Lester has discovered a gem among whiskies. "It's Calvert Reserve," he says, "and the day I first tasted it, I switched to Calvert's smoother taste. It's a real find!"

what he goes after and no stopping him."

He flipped his cigarette away, and hooked his thumbs in the brass studded gunbelt around his middle. "Now you better buy that one ticket to Omaha."

John Humberson bent down to pick up the fallen coins. Bitter memories were running through his mind like a racing grass fire. Was it possible that a man could do the things Matson had done? It was bloody—ghastly. But the facts were there. Blindly, he fumbled for one of the coins, and Little Mick moved his boot toe to kick it away.

HUMBERSON snatched. His hand closed around Little Mick's ankle. The gunman hissed like a startled rattler, and his hand dove for the big gunbutt. Humberson heaved upward, jerking at the ankle with all the strength and weight of his small, wiry body. He felt Little Mick leave the floor.

The dwarfish gunman seemed to hang in mid-air for a long time before he fell, and during that moment, he was snatching at his gun. But he fell flat on his back, the jar driving the wind out of him, and his hand fumbled aimlessly for the gun. Humberson moved with reckless speed.

He stepped forward and kicked at Little Mick's wrist. The gunman snarled an oath of pain and tried to roll away, but Humberson dropped downward, driving both his knees into the man's stomach. The breath gusted out of Little Mick, and the fight went out of him. Humberson grabbed the heavy gun and pulled it free.

"You fool!" Little Mick rasped. "You crazy fool—!"

"Shut up!" Humberson said, and then laughed. He looked around at the loungers, the baggage men and the ticket clerk. They had stopped what they were doing now and were watching him. They were always ready to stop and watch a fight. Watch—but not interfere.

He flipped the loading gate of the gun open and jacked the shells out of it. They spilled on the floor with dull thuds. When the gun was empty, he lifted it by the barrel and brought it down on the floor. Once, twice, he slammed it down, until he felt it shatter beneath the blows. Then he flung the useless thing to one side and got to his feet.

"Go back and tell Dirk Matson what happened," he said, breathing hard. "Tell him that Natalie and I took the train—"

"I won't have to go anywhere to tell him," Little Mick rasped, coming to his feet as if he were built on springs. "I got here last night—found out you and the girl were here and wired Dirk. He rode all night to get here. He's in town right now!"

"What?" Humberson sucked his breath in slowly, and suddenly he felt furtive. He wanted to hide; wanted to run. Wanted to do anything to get away. He spun to the ticket clerk, and flung the coins at him.

"Write out two tickets for Omaha," he blared. "I'll be back to pick 'em up—just before the train leaves—have them ready—!"

Then he was gone, his boots clumping hollowly on the depot platform. As he plunged into the crowd on the main street, he heard Little Mick's laugh behind him. He flung a glance over his shoulder. Little Mick was just lifting his fingers to his mouth. A shrill whistle cut through the hubbub of the traffic. It came again—and then once more, each time with a distinctive little trill at the end of it.

The third whistle had hardly died away when there was a commotion farther up the street. A man cursed loudly, another yelled indignantly, and then two men stepped nimbly off the sidewalk to make room for a man rushing down the sidewalk.

Humberson started to run, but knew that it was useless. Dirk Matson had already seen him.

In a land of big men, Dirk Matson stood inches above the biggest. His clothes were the fanciest; almost those of a fop. But underneath the silks and ruffles that covered him, was a powerful body, a slab-muscled and tough. The grin on his face wasn't a smile; it was a cruel, mocking smirk.

"Going somewhere, Humberson?" Dirk Matson laughed as he stopped in front of John and planted his feet wide.

"Yeah," Little Mick spoke up behind Humberson. "He's going to Omaha—him and the girl. So he thinks."

Matson's eyes flicked for one instant past Humberson. "What happened to

your gun Mick? What's the story?"

"He took it way from me and busted it," Little Mick said matter-of-factly.

"Tough guy, ain't he?" Matson chuckled. "Jumped on a great big gent like you and took your gun away from you."

"Lemme one of your guns, boss," Little Mick went on. "I don't like gents taking advantage of my size—"

But Matson shook his head. "We ain't gonna use a gun on this job, Mick."

"You kidding?" Mick grunted. "This gent was heading back East with the gal and she was glad to be going with him."

"Just why we ain't gonna use no gun-play on this job, Mick," Matson went on. "First off, this gent wouldn't try to use a gun. Remember, Mick? He had a chance to use a gun onet—and he didn't have the guts to haul iron."

"Yeah, I remember," Mick said wearily. "I stood and cussed him for five minutes trying to make him draw against me. But he wouldn't. So you worked him over with your fists. No, he wouldn't try to use a gun—and we'd have to make it look like he tried to use a gun. Plant a gun on him. And that would be hard to do."

"But that ain't the real reason, Mick. The girl. If we gunned him down, she'd be meaner'n a snake about it. But if he crawled—if he tucked his tail and snuck out on that train by himself—leaving her here—"

"You know your women, all right Dirk," Little Mick said admiringly. "Nothing would break her spirit faster than to see this punk sneak out of town without her."

Matson nodded and flung a glance over his shoulder to a certain window on the second floor of the hotel. Despite himself, John Humberson felt his eyes drawn that way, too. He was just in time to see the curtains fall back in place. Dirk Matson grinned broadly.

Suddenly the traffic had ceased to flow around them on the sidewalk, and Humberson saw with a shock that the sidewalk for a block either way was deserted. Wagons had slowed down, the drivers watching the tight little drama on the sidewalk.

It was the same as it had been before. People merely stood by and watched a thing happen in this crazy country. They

made no move to interfere. If the rankest injustice was being done before their very eyes, they let it happen; actually seemed to get a kick out of watching it.

"You got your walking orders, Humberson," Dirk Matson said loudly. "Git going—toward the station."

He started to say something, but the words stuck in his throat. He turned and stumbled blindly down the sidewalk, unheeding the cold, contemptuous glances of those he passed. He wanted to look back over his shoulder at the window in the hotel. But he dared not. He reached the edge of the sidewalk and half-stumbled as he stepped off into the dust of the street.

And his clumsiness brought a guffaw from Dirk Matson. "Pick up your feet, Tenderfoot," he yelled. Humberson threw a glance over his shoulder at that. Little Mick was still watching him from the sidewalk. But Dirk Matson had turned and was walking toward the hotel.

The ticket clerk looked up at him as he reached the window. "Still want two tickets to Omaha, mister?" he asked. Humberson saw the downward curl of the man's lips, and he knew that he had been watching, and that his question was merely sarcasm.

"One's enough," he said and the clerk flipped it toward him contemptuously.

CHAPTER

3

Showdown

He wandered down the platform, until he was hidden by a stack of baggage. He wished the train would hurry. He longed to be on it; to be travelling away from this cursed land.

He had enough money to get all the way back East. He had connections back there and getting a job would be no problem. He'd been a good newspaperman, and he would be again. It wouldn't take long to wipe out the memory—

And there his thinking stopped. Because he knew that he would live with this memory for the rest of his life. He knew he would always remember looking up and seeing the curtains fall back in place in the upstairs hotel room. He would always—

"John."

He whirled around, hardly daring to

believe what he saw. But there she was. Natalie! He swallowed hard a time or two before he could say anything. Then:

"You got here all right?"

"Yes." She came slowly down the platform.

"Dirk—?"

"I was in the lobby of the hotel when he came in. I told him we were already married—and that I was leaving with you."

"And he didn't try to stop you?" he muttered.

"He wouldn't have dared tried to," she said calmly. "There were men around who'd heard me say we were married. They would have stopped him."

"Would they now?" he said sarcastically. "From what I've seen they wouldn't have turned a hand."

"Hush, now, John. It's all over," Natalie said. "We've got our lives ahead of us. Let's talk about what we're going to do—after we get back East."

"Of course," he mumbled. "It—will be right nice—back East—"

But the words he was speaking, and the thoughts that were running through his mind, had no relation. Because a doubt was forming in his mind.

He had Natalie. She had come to him, knowing that he was a coward. Knowing that he would have gotten on the train and left to make her way the best she could. Yes, she was his. He looked into her pale violet eyes, and knew that he would have her love as long as he lived.

Her love, yes. But how about his? Did he really love her, or had he taken her just to save his wounded spirit after the kicking Dirk Matson had given him?

Was taking the girl his own sneaky way of getting even with Dirk Matson for the humiliation Matson had caused him?

He tried to shake the questions off, but they came back stronger than ever. He tried to tell himself that even if that were so, it made no difference now. He had Natalie, and that was all that mattered.

But he knew he was lying, and the long whistle of a train jarred him out of his lethargy. In a few minutes they would be on the train heading east, and this chapter of his life would be closed.

No, not closed. Forever open—forever plaguing him, making his life too miserable

to live. He whirled and grabbed Natalie's thin shoulders.

"I won't be long!" he said quickly.

"I've got—something to finish—"

"All right, John—"

Then he was running up the platform, past the loungers and the ticket clerk, then into the dust of the street. He knew his breath was coming in raspy gusts, and that his hands were clammy with sweat, but he didn't stop running. He knew if he slowed down, he would be lost. If he slowed down, he'd stop. And if he'd stopped—

"Hey, yonder he comes—with blood in his eye!"

A burly teamster sent the cry rolling down the street. A half dozen other throats took it up, and Humberson had a quick revulsion. The crowd had been waiting to see if he'd fight! A man laughed loudly, and the revulsion deepened in Humberson. A regular Roman carnival—that's all these people were interested in! Then another man yelled, and his revulsion turned to wonder.

"Go git 'im, stranger!" the man bawled. "He's got it coming—and he's yore meat!"

They wanted to see him win! For a moment the shock of it drove the fear from his mind. But the appearance of the street brought the fear back. For it and the sidewalks were clearing as if by magic. The pedestrians were ducking into every convenient doorway, or around the corners of the buildings. And in the street, heavy wagons were pulling off to either side, leaving the main thoroughfare blank and deserted. A quick unnatural silence settled over the town.

Humberson's run had slowed down to a jogtrot, and now he slowed down to a walk. He heard a low murmur run through the crowd, as if the crowd had sensed the appearance of Dirk Matson a second before he actually came out of the hotel.

Little Mick was right behind him, as he came striding to the sidewalk and then out into the street.

"What's this, Tenderfoot?" Matson rumbled loudly.

"Showdown, Matson," Humberson yelled, and he was surprised at the firmness of his voice. "I'm not taking the train

for Omaha. I'm not taking the train anywhere—"

"Gimme a gun, boss!" Little Mick yelped suddenly, and darted closer to Matson. Humberson saw the move, and suddenly he knew the reason for it. Matson counted on Little Mick to do his gunwork for him.

"Mick—stay clear!" The words tore out of Humberson's throat without effort. His hand reached for his hip pocket. He heard cloth rip as he jerked the gun free and brought it up. The thunder of its explosion seemed to rock the quiet town to its foundations. Dust gouted into the air between Little Mick and Matson. The little gunman hesitated—then took a backward step away from Matson, moving out of the line of fire.

"I can lick Mick with my fists—so Mick needs a gun to make himself equal to me!" Humberson heard himself yelling. "I'm no match for you physically, Dirk—but this piece of metal evens things up—this little piece of metal—a gun—"

"Yeah boy! You tell 'im, Tenderfoot!" an exuberant teamster bellowed, and Humberson felt a warm glow spread through him. It wasn't a fight these people wanted to see. Not just for the sake of seeing a fight.

They wanted and liked to see a man stand up for his own; to fight his own battles. To take a licking if need be, to win if he had the guts—

"Mick—take 'im—kill 'im—!" The words ripped from Matson's throat in a hysterical burst.

"He doesn't have a gun, Matson. I broke it. Remember?" Humberson yelled the words out and started to move forward.

"Your gun's already out," Matson yelled. "Won't you even gimme an even break—"

Humberson started to shove the gun in his pocket and then saw his mistake. Dirk Matson was driving his big hands downward, catching Humberson off guard. They flashed upward with blinding speed—gunfired. He's twice as fast as I am, Humberson thought. And still he was afraid. Matson was showing fear a moment ago—

His gun was half in, half out of his

pocket. Matson had flinched at a gunshot—he remembered that, and pulled the trigger of his gun, feeling the bullet rip through the cloth of his pocket. But it was enough. He saw Dirk Matson flinch ever so slightly.

Matson got in the first shot. Humberson was still jerking at his gun when he heard the slug whine past his head. That flinch made him miss—

Then he thought no more. His gun was up, and he could see Matson's broad chest over the sights. It took him a second to realize that the blast he heard was from his own gun and that Matson had staggered backwards as if hit by some invisible force. He heard Matson's gun roar again, and felt something hot and sharp tear into his leg.

It hurt. He was conscious of the pain. But it didn't hurt near as much as the humiliation he'd felt when he'd walked back to the station. He fired again; saw Matson grab his chest and stretched way up on tiptoe before he fell. . . .

"Natalie, I—I won't hold you to your promise to marry me," John Humberson said. The Doctor had gone, after dressing his leg and ordering him to stay in bed for a week. "Not now—not since you've found out—what a coward I am—"

"Call yourself a coward?" Natalie asked, smilingly.

"Of course."

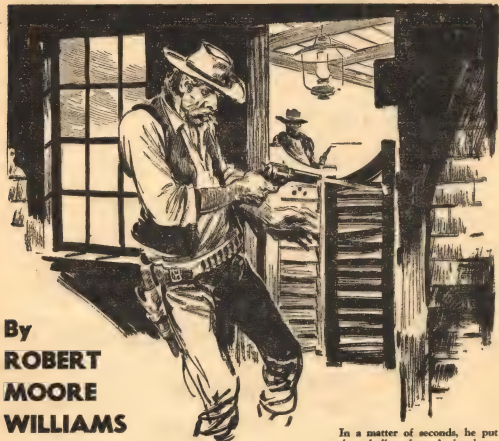
"Well, you can stop. A coward is a man who protects himself—who only gambles on a sure thing. Like Matson. He had to have Little Mick around. Even in Ten Strike when he fought you with his fists Little Mick was standing by—just in case. That's what I always call a coward."

"But I almost left you here—"

"I knew you wouldn't," she said. "I knew that sooner or later you'd realize what Matson was—and do—what you had to do. Say?" she asked with a mischievous grin. "Are you just trying to wriggle out of marrying me?"

He grinned. There was no doubt in his mind now. "Honey, go down in the lobby and find a man named Kessel. He wants to buy some advertising in our paper. You might as well start learning the newspaper business now."

DEAD-MAN DOWRY



By
**ROBERT
MOORE
WILLIAMS**

In a matter of seconds, he put three bullets through the doors.

CLEANING and loading his gun before making his nightly round, Marshal Jim Talbot thought: *When a man shoots at you, you don't stop to ask who he is. You kill him. Or he kills you.*

He had been under a lucky star the night he killed Jefferson Moler. Or so he had thought at the time, since the kid had shot first. Later, when he learned this hell-raising, fast-shooting wild man had been the kid brother of Kelso Moler, who ran the biggest saloon in town, he had figured maybe he wasn't so lucky after all. Knowing Moler, he had known that sooner or later the saloon man would try to

pay off what Moler considered to be a blood debt. Fat and slow-moving, the saloon man would not come at him directly. A knife in the back, a shot from an alley, would be more his style. Or a hired killer.

Outside the marshal's room, the stairs creaked under stealthy steps. Talbot swung up the gun to cover the door. *This, he thought, is the way Moler will come.*

The steps creaked to a halt outside his door. The knob began to turn. "Come on in," Talbot said. The door opened.

At the sight of the gun covering him, the man in the door shied like a scared horse. "Marshal Talbot, suh!" he protested wheezingly.

When Marshal Jim Talbot fell hook, line and bullets for love, he came within a trigger-click of attending the wedding as a corpse.

Talbot relaxed. This was Bing. Bing was a drunken, worthless bum, a stool pigeon, a panhandler, and other things, but under no circumstances could Talbot consider him a potential killer. Bing didn't have enough guts for that kind of work. Talbot holstered the gun. With great relief on his face, Bing watched the weapon go out of sight.

"What's up, Bing?" Talbot said.

Bing's blotched face showed distress.

"It's that Ned Kirkendall," he said.

"He—" Bing hesitated.

"Go on," Talbot urged. "What about Ned Kirkendall?"

"He—uh—sed—that is—" Either the news he was bringing, or something else, was scaring Bing.

"What did he say?" Talbot patiently questioned. Bing often brought him information, such items as a new bad-man in town, who had threatened to kill who, the arrival of trail crews, all of which was important to a marshal trying to keep the peace and to stay alive while he did it. Bing hoarded information the way a magpie hoards bright bits of glass, reluctantly letting go of each item. Always Talbot had to pry the news out of him. Prying, Talbot eventually learned what Ned Kirkendall had said.

"He sed this town ain't big enough for you and him," Bing spoke. "He sed he was goin' gunnin' for you!"

Talbot grunted tonelessly. Several men had said they were going gunning for him and hadn't meant it. But Ned Kirkendall might have meant it. Arriving in town two months before, a wild kid fresh up the trail from Texas, Kirkendall had tried to take the town apart. Talbot had knocked him down and had taken his gun away from him.

To the marshal, this was just part of a night's work. No animosity or hard feelings had been involved. But to Ned Kirkendall, it might have been a mortal offense.

Talbot thought: *That son has been hanging out in Moler's place and he's been making sweet-talk at Lucy.* This he knew himself.

All of which might add a portentous meaning to Bing's tip-off. He knew the girl Lucy. A little dance hall jill. The important thing was—Moler owned her.

Moler could have put her up to making eyes at Ned Kirkendall. After that, everything would follow in regular order.

It would be no hard trick, when the kid was drunk, for Lucy to egg him on to taking a crack at the marshal. Thus Kelso Moler, in perfect safety to himself, could pay off his blood debt.

Talbot lifted hard eyes to Bing. "Did you hear Kirkendall say he was gunning for me?"

"Uh—thet is—no."

"Then how did you learn he said it?"

"Uh—" Bing writhed like a hound dog.

"Who told you?" Talbot's voice was a whip flaying this hound dog.

"Uh—Lucy."

Talbot leaned back in his chair. This was not the right answer. It was true that Bing was always running errands for Lucy, and saw her often, but she knew Bing too well to tell him anything important. He stared at the squirming man. "You've got the guts to tell me this when you know that Moler has been using Lucy to egg Kirkendall to take a crack at me."

Bing twisted and looked over his shoulder at the door as if he was estimating how hard it was to get out of this place.

"She knows you stool for me," Talbot said. "She wouldn't tell you that Kirkendall was gunning for me. She would figure you would run straight to me with it." His voice was hard, challenging, demanding.

"Hit's the truth," Bing burst out. Suddenly he found words. "She not only told me but she sent me to tell you about it. Ned's drunk tonight and he's on the prod for you because you roughed him up. If he meets you, there'll be gun play. Lucy sent me to ask you to keep out of Ned's way until she has time to sober him up."

"By gosh!" Talbot gasped. There was a ring of truth about this somewhere, except for one thing—the girl's motive. He tried to think of that motive and failed. "Now why would she do that?"

"Because she's done fell in love with Ned!" Bing answered, sweating. "They're fixin' to get hitched up tomorrow. Ned got drunk tonight, to celebrate, and got to thinking about how you had treated him. She's trying to save him, marshal, and thet's the truth if I ever spoke it."

Lucy in love with Kirkendall! Talbot almost grinned. This was a twist Kelso Moler had not anticipated. But he was irritated about something else. "Save him from me? What kind of a monster does she think I am?"

"Why, you'll shoot him if he goes for you!" Bing answered, surprised. "Everybody knows that. She sed to ask you jist to stay out of his way, please, for to-night, thet tomorrow she'll have him sober."

"But what if I do run into him?" Talbot protested. "After all, I've got my job to do. If a disturbance comes up, I've got to go see about it."

BING was still able to find words when he wanted to. "She's got that all taken care of, marshul. She sed for you not to worry none if you do run into him, even if he goes for his gun—because she's took all the shells out of it."

"What?" Talbot frowned. An empty gun? He didn't like the sound of that. "He'll notice his gun is not loaded."

Bing shook his head. "She put empties back in the cylinder. He's loaded with panther juice and it ain't likely he'll ever notice he's carrying a gun loaded with empty hulls. And, so you'll know she actually unloaded the gun, she sent you these."

From his pocket, Bing fumbled six shining brass cartridges. Points up, he set them on Talbot's desk. All polished brass and dull lead, they stood there like six little soldiers guaranteeing Ned Kirkendall's good conduct this night.

Beside the desk, Bing sweated. "Lucy is a mighty fine girl, marshul." His voice was earnest with conviction. "All she asks is one break. You'll give it to her, won't you? She kind of wants to know."

"A fine girl?" Talbot said. Distaste sounded in his voice. He had no illusions about Lucy. "She's a little dance hall flirt."

"By gosh!" Bing blazed. He doubled up his fist. "You can't say thet about Lucy."

"What the hell is eating you?" Talbot grunted. "She's a little flirt and you know it."

With the doubled fist, Bing struck him in the mouth.

A grizzly bear, tackled by a lone hound dog, would not have been more surprised than Jim Talbot. There wasn't enough strength in the blow to do him any harm. He got to his feet, shoved Bing across the room. The man went backward, hit the wall and slid down it to the floor. From this position he continued to shake his fist at the astonished marshal.

"You can't say thet about my datter, neither you nor no man!"

"Your daughter?" Talbot whispered. "Lucy is your daughter?" Boundless astonishment moved in him. He understood now why Bing had acted as he had. With understanding came sympathy.

"She don't know it," the stool-pigeon whimpered. "There ain't nobody around here knows it but me. By gosh, if you ever tell her!"

The surprised marshal heard his own voice apologizing profusely for his actions. "I'm sorry, Bing. I didn't know. Hell, man—" He kicked at the floor. "I'm just plain sorry."

"Bing got to his feet. "You won't never tell her," he anxiously asked.

"I'll never tell her," Talbot fervidly promised. And meant it.

"And you won't shoot Ned even if you run into him by accident and he goes for his gun?" Bing continued. "She'll make him a good wife. I know she will. All them kids need is one good break. You'll give it to them, won't you?"

Across the room six little brass and lead soldiers, guaranteeing Ned Kirkendall's conduct, urged him to say yes. "Sure," he said. "You can go and tell Lucy everything is all right."

Like a hound dog hurrying home with good news, Bing slid through the door and down the stairs.

Later that night Jim Talbot went out to make his rounds. In the 'Frisco Saloon, he stopped a fist fight. In a barrel-house where whiskey was sold by the dipper-full from a barrel, he talked a drunken cowboy into surrendering his gun. When he reached Peg Martin's place, he found growing tumult, with sounds of loud argument, but at his entrance the saloon quieted down and the argument ended in a drink on the house. Covering the town, he stayed away from the Red Dog Saloon, owned and operated by Kelso

Moler. He would steer clear of him.

Boom-boom, two quick shots sounded in the night. A man yelled. A third shot blasted. The man did not yell again.

The shots came from in or near Kelso Moler's place.

With real regret, but with no hesitation, Jim Talbot moved toward the Red Dog Saloon. Drawing his gun, he felt his heart beat climb in the old familiar rhythm as he went into danger. He pushed open the swinging doors of the saloon.

Inside was tip-toe quietness. The piano had stopped. The gambling had been momentarily arrested. Heads were turned toward the rear of the saloon and men were moving in that direction. The back door was open a crack and a white-aproned bartender was trying to look out into the alley without exposing himself. Trying to see something at the rear, a man was peeping through a back window. Kelso Moler, gold watch chains looped across his paunch, was standing at the back end of the bar looking toward the rear. No one noticed the marshal enter.

"What's the trouble?" Talbot spoke quietly but in this silence, his voice sounded loud. Startled faces turned toward him.

One of these faces, he saw, belonged to Ned Kirkendall. Recognizing the marshal and seeing the gun in his hand, Kirkendall whirled like a startled cat.

"You son!" The words spat from Kirkendall's mouth. "You shot off your gun in the back and then slipped up behind me while I was looking in the other direction!"

It was a charge that only a drunken man—or a badly misinformed man—would bring against Jim Talbot. But Kirkendall made it. From the look on his face, he believed it.

"Quiet—" was as far as Talbot got. But no farther. Kirkendall's hand dived for the gun holstered inside his coat.

AT THE sight of the moving hand, reflexes rooted deep in Jim Talbot went instantly into action. He could have shot the man three times before Kirkendall got his gun free. But with the memory fresh in his mind of the six little brass and lead soldiers guaranteeing this man's conduct, Jim Talbot held his fire.

He saw the gun come down on him and he waited for the foolish expression to form on Kirkendall's face when the hammer fell on an empty shell.

The hammer fell.

Hot lead screamed past Talbot's head. Powder smoke blasted around him. The roar of the gun thundered in his ears. Empty gun, hell! That shooter was loaded! Kirkendall had shot to kill but shooting hastily, had missed. Talbot knew he had been—and still was—within an inch of death. Kirkendall was pulling the trigger for a second shot.

Surprised as he was, Talbot did not fail to shoot now. He had no time to aim. Now he had to depend on his hand pointing the gun where his eyes were looking—at Kirkendall's gun. In Talbot's hand, the gun exploded.

In response, Kirkendall's hand jumped. The gun vanished. There was a rattling thump as it hit the floor. Disarmed, Kirkendall stared from wild eyes at a hand suddenly spouting red.

Tightening a second time on the trigger, Talbot caught his finger. In spite of what

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had happened, he had no desire to kill this man. But he had an overwhelming desire to ask some questions.

In the silent saloon, startled men stared at him. He caught a glimpse of Moler poking his head over the top of the bar. When the guns started, Moler had hunted a place to hide. Across the room, Lucy screamed, then came running to stare from horror-struck eyes first at Ned Kirkendall, then at Jim Talbot.

"What gave you the idea I would come up behind you if I was after you?" Talbot spoke. Death had passed very close to him and he was shaken.

"Why—" Kirkendall tried to think. "Uh, everybody said it."

"Who in particular said it?"

Kirkendall's eyes went around the saloon. "Everybody thought it." His voice sounded wild.

Talbot's eyes sought Lucy. "You sent word he was drunk and gunning for me," he said.

She stared at him. "I didn't send any word."

"What? You sent word you had loaded Ned's gun with empties and if I met him and he went for his gun, I wasn't to pay any attention. You even sent the shells you had taken out of his gun!" His voice rose in pitch when he thought of the shells. Bing, he would not have believed but the shells had carried conviction. But, instead of guaranteeing Kirkendall's conduct, they had been the little brass soldiers of a firing squad, with every chunk of lead aimed straight at his heart.

"Are you crazy?" the girl whispered. "I didn't take the shells out of Ned's gun. Do you think I wanted to get him killed?" Her voice grew shrill. "What's the matter with you, are you drunk?"

"I feel like I'm both crazy and drunk!" Talbot answered. "You also sent word you and Ned were planning to get married."

Fear was added to the fright on her face. "Where'd you hear that? Ain't nobody but me and Ned knows that. I mean—"

Behind the bar, Kelso Moler heard what she said. He didn't look pleased. All eyes watched Talbot.

"Then you do intend to get married?" the marshal spoke. "That much is true,

at least. Does that go for you too, Ned?"

"Uh—it shore does." Kirkendall glanced at the girl. As scared and as hurt as he was, he still looked at Lucy as if he was proud of her. He knew her and still he was proud. Talbot found cause for wonder in this fact. He noticed that Kirkendall spoke out with no hesitation and that, bad as his hand must be hurting, no whimper of pain had passed the kid's lips. Somehow he was suddenly glad he had been looking at the kid's hand instead of his heart when he pulled the trigger. But—

Talbot's eyes jabbed at Lucy. "You still say you sent me no word?" he spoke. His voice demanded the truth, and nothing but the truth.

"Of course I say it. It's true." She looked at him and past him. Her eyes widened. She screamed.

Instantly Talbot dropped to the floor. Behind him the batwing doors were pushed partly open. Thrusting between them was a gun. This Lucy had seen and had screamed a warning.

The bullet from the gun thrusting through the batwings went over Talbot. He could see feet below the doors but the man holding the gun he could not see.

Within less than three seconds, he put three bullets through the doors. Outside a man screamed, a hoarse gobbling sound. Dropping away, the gun thrust through the doors fell inside the saloon. The man who had held it fell outside. Under the doors, his feet were visible as he threshed in agony there.

"Don't anybody move in this place," Talbot said. He pushed open the doors. Light from inside the saloon fell across the ragged clothes and the blotched face of Bing.

Talbot went down on one knee. "You fired the shots in the alley behind the Red Dog, to draw me down here," he said.

THE wretched man looked past Talbot into the saloon and shook his head. He wouldn't talk. He didn't intend to talk. Talbot glanced around. Lucy and Ned Kirkendall had followed him to the door and were staring down from shocked faces at the man lying there.

"Get to hell back, you two!" Talbot

snailed, kneeling alongside of Bing.

There was something in his voice that sent them hurrying backward away from him. He turned to Bing. "You told Ned I would shoot him in the back if I got the chance. You told me Lucy had put empties in Ned's gun. You fired the shots to draw me down here, knowing I would go in the front and that Ned, already scared half to death, would take a crack at me. You knew I wouldn't shoot him because I thought his gun was empty. You begged me to give him a chance. You tried to get me killed. What I want to know is—Why?"

Coughing, Bing shook his head.

"Either tell me or I'll tell her who you are," Talbot said.

Under the threat, Bing writhed.

"I'll tell her!" Talbot repeated.

"All right," Bing whispered. "It was jist as you said."

"Why? What do you have against me that makes you want to kill me?"

"I ain't got anything against you, marshal," Bing wailed. "I was jist trying—" He coughed, struggled for breath. "I was jist trying to get Lucy a wedding present."

"A what?" Talbot gasped.

"Kelso said he'd pay a thousand dollars for your hide," Bing gasped. "I tried to fix it for Ned to collect. When he failed, I tried to collect it myself, for a wedding present for—you know who."

"Good Lord!" Talbot whispered.

"I jist didn't have any other way to get something for her," Bing whispered.

The cough came again, harder, harsher, then stopped. Bing's labored breathing went into silence.

Talbot got to his feet. He moved into the saloon. Lucy, staring at the expression on his face, thought he meant to harm Kirkendall. She began to wail.

"You better get him to a doctor," Talbot said.

"You're not going to arrest him?" She sounded as if she didn't believe her ears.

Talbot shook his head. "I think Ned has learned enough right here in the last few minutes to last a smart man the rest of his life. I'm not going to arrest him. I'm going to congratulate him—and wish him luck. Get along now to a doctor."

Averting their heads at the sight of the figure lying there, they went quickly through the batwings.

She doesn't know who he is, Talbot thought. *She'll never know.*

In this moment, he harbored no grudge against Bing. In his warped way, Bing had been trying to do something for someone he loved dearly.

Behind the bar, Moler moved quietly toward the rear.

"Just a minute," Talbot said. He vaulted the bar. The gun in his hand jabbed itself into Kelso Moler's stomach.

"I'll kill you if you lie to me. Did you or did you not tell Bing that you would pay a bounty of a thousand dollars for my hide?"

Moler's face looked as if it was going to melt and run. "I—uh—didn't mean it, marshal. I was just joshing. Bing didn't—uh—he didn't have enough sense to understand what I meant."

Here was the truth at last. "I think he understood you well enough," Talbot said. "And so do I. And I think you will understand me when I tell you that if you ever make another move against me, I will kill you. No matter what happens to me, I will kill you."

Moler's face, melting in greasy stains of double-rendered fat, said he understood.

"And you're going to pay that bounty," Talbot said. "Tomorrow, as a wedding present, you're going to give Lucy your blessing—and a thousand dollars. Or—" The muzzle of the gun jabbed deeper into Moler's stomach. "—here and now I'm going to blow your backbone in two. Do I hear your promise to give her your blessing and the bounty on my hide?"

Talbot heard the promise. Moler repeated it twice.

Slowly, Talbot holstered the gun. He moved to the door.

"Okay, Bing?" he said to the still figure lying there.

Bing didn't answer. But Talbot felt somehow that Bing approved. This lean and blotched and wretched hound had wanted his little girl to have a wedding present and she was getting it and that was all that mattered. Talbot moved out into the street, out into the quiet night.

REP OF A ROGUE

By NORMAN A. FOX



Gunhawk Considine had his man covered, but he wasn't convinced that squeezing the trigger was the easiest way out.

HE TOOK his supper at the Longhorn, for the hotel offered a dining room of sorts, and Considine had quickly formed a distaste for this town and had no wish to prow! its dusty street. He had come in on the south-north stage,

not knowing about the stop-over until he was at the Sundance wagon yard and the driver had told him in short words. The driver had attained those years where all men stood equal in his squinted eyes, none of them counting for much; so Considine had only listened. Later he'd walked to the hotel and put his name to its register in a big, bold fist, knowing the news would

"You might have gone out by the stage — now you'll walk."



carry. This gesture was his rebuke to the stage driver and held, too, his contempt for Sundance. He had to be here until morning.

Fed, he came to the Longhorn's gallery at the hour when the lamps were lighted and the harshness of the town was not such a raw thing. He seated himself and crossed his legs on the gallery's railing, a lengthy man with a face strong of jaw, his gun showing plain and all his garb black. These were his trademarks: the gun and the costly clothes, and an arrogance that kept his face wooden; and he merely sat, watching cowland's citizenry drift by, watching them watch him from the corners of their eyes. He had known this aloof scrutiny in many towns, and he thought: *They've heard about that Wyoming ruckus*, and he hated them all impersonally, not wasting energy at it, and thought of bed.

The girl came along then.

He didn't see her at first; he had just noticed the one-story brick structure that was being reared across the street; it stood now a shell needing finishing, but at least it made Sundance different from the dozen towns he'd seen as he came northward. They'd all had a sameness to them with their single rutted street and their preponderance of false-fronts and warped siding, but here was brick. There'd be a lot of it in the years to come, he supposed, but he wasn't sure he'd like the change.

The girl said, "So you're the terrible man."

She stood on the boardwalk before the gallery, her head tilted back to look up at him, her hands on her hips. Her dress was prim enough, but her face was saucy, and her hat was something to start a stampede, a fooforaw hat with a long, trailing plume. Her hair, he judged, was the sooty black that smoke sometimes attains. Considine nudged back his sombrero, giving her this much deference but not knowing what answer to make; and she said, "I supposed you'd be snorting sulphur."

He smiled; and it made him what he was, a man in his mid-twenties; it made him what he might have been if his life had not been a river flung down tortuous channels. He said, "Now who would you be?"

"Cora Webb." She had laughter in her

voice. "It's a lovely night. Do you think we should let it go to waste?"

It was a night of soft breeze and the quiet stirrings of summer, a night with cowboys riding in from far-flung ranches to raise the dust and make movement and sound along the street. There might be a hint of moon over the buttes and a silver sheen to the prairie, if a man were of a mind to look. He had used his eyes for other things in recent years; in his trade one kept constant vigil, even in a strange town like Sundance. That was habit. But suddenly he was tired of this alertness of necessity, and the night was wine in him, and he came to his feet and made a sort of bow. "I'd be pleased to be shown the sights."

"In Sundance?" She waved her hand. "The night's out yonder."

"I'll hire a rig," he said.

He stepped down from the gallery and offered her his arm, and they were two young people of an evening; but part of him still stood sentinel. He brought his face close to hers and looked and wondered; it was the hat that made him wonder, for she was no dance hall hussy to throw herself at a man, and he wasn't an awkward swain who'd known no woman before.

He said, "How do you know I don't gobble up little girls for breakfast."

"Maybe," she said, "I'd like that."

The fat man's shadow fell upon them, for the fat man had come along the street and paused. He said, "You'd be Considine?"

In the vagrant lamplight, Considine's first impression was of an expanse of flowered waistcoat and the glitter of a great watchchain; and then he saw the man's smile and was engulfed in the benevolence of it. You found a man like this one in every town, but usually he was not so fat and he wore no smile.

Considine said, "I'm busy."

The fat man lifted a hand and wagged it. "Run along, Cora. I want to talk to him."

The laughter was gone from Cora's voice. "That's for him to say."

Considine looked at the fat man and said, "No! You run along."

"Friends," said the fat man, "you don't understand," and he made no move until

Considine put the flat of his free hand against the expanse of waistcoat and shoved. The fat man sat down heavily on the boardwalk and looked up with the smile still on him but his eyes not believing. Cora drew her skirt close to pass him, and her voice was small and scared when she spoke again, "You shouldn't have done that!"

"Who is he?"

"Happy Cryder."

He remembered the name; he had glimpsed it from the stage-coach as it had rolled into Sundance; the biggest false-front in town had borne the legend: *The Fandango Saloon—Happy Cryder, Prop.* There was no missing a sign as big as Cryder's.

AT THE shadowy mouth of the livery, Considine said, "Wait here," and shortly he tooted an open-topped buggy from the yard and handed her up. He pointed the horse along the street; when they came abreast of the Longhorn, Cryder was gone from the boardwalk. A light had sprung in the brick shell across the way, and a man stood in the naked doorway, a small man wearing spectacles and a blue business suit. He touched his hat to Cora, but the gesture seemed instinctive; there was little homage in it.

Considine said, "Who's he?"

"Austin Langley," she said. "He's building a bank."

His lips flattened, and he thought: *Now I know three people in this burg*, and the girl was still the one he couldn't peg.

Cora said, "Let me have the reins."

He liked the way she handled them; she had a man's firm touch. She got the horse to trotting, and they rattled along the street; jingles laid a striped pattern across the dust and the hitchrails stood lined and men's mingled voices made a steady beat. Abreast of a small frame building with the inevitable false-front, she inclined her head. "My place," she said. "Hats. For the wives and daughters of ranchers; for the wives of men like Langley. It's a living."

It explained that plumed thing she was wearing. Considine said, "You like working your fingers for other people?"

"It makes me part of something," she said.

He shook his head, not understanding; he had known women, but they had either been shy and simpering or so forthright as to freeze him with their directness. This one was a puzzle. He thought: *She'll want me to kiss her*; but she brought the rig across the prairie and up a looping road to the flat top of a bench where two cottonwoods stood, and in their shadow she drew to a halt and leaned back in the seat, not looking at him but at the scene before them.

"There it is," she said.

The moon showed itself, and the night was strong and warm and deep-reaching. Below, the town sprawled, a clutter of buildings dumped haphazardly, a scar against the prairie; yet he sensed something of her feeling, for he'd had roots once, briefly, and sometimes the memory choked him. Against this sentiment he always put a blunt belligerency, and he said, "It's ugly as sin."

"That's because it's today," she said. He frowned, and she said, "Not many years ago the only thing standing below was likely a Crow teepee. Cattle came here and Texas men with them, and they built a town. Did you ever see a newborn baby? They're red and ugly, and they squawl. But they grow up to be people, good or bad." She turned her eyes on him. "What's it like, being a hired gunman?"

He remembered her own words. "It's a living."

She said, "But you don't like it, so you tell yourself you're bigger than the rest of the world and mighty important punkins. After a while you begin to believe it."

"In Wyoming," he said, "I was on the losing side."

"But Considine didn't lose," she said. "He got a reputation for himself that we heard of, even in Sundance." He felt the intensity of her eyes. "You're staying long?"

"Till tomorrow morning's stage."

"No work for you in Sundance?"

If she had let it lie, not asking that, he might not have wondered what track her talk was taking. He said, "Sheep and cow trouble's shaping up on the Marias. That fetched me to Montana. I like my shows big and noisy. I could spit from

one end of Sundance to the other."

A piano tinkled discordantly below, in the Fandango, perhaps, and the sound beat upward, bringing Sundance here to the bench; and whatever there'd been of aloneness was gone. Cora said, "We might as well be getting back," and clucked the horse to motion. But when she brought the buggy into town, she halted it before a tiny house on the outskirts. "This is where I live," she said. "Come in?"

He said, "That stage goes early."

"Don't be a fool," she said. "The bed-bugs will eat you alive in the Longhorn."

He still hadn't pegged her, but this was like that tinny piano spoiling the moonlight; this was a flower blighted by frost. He knew how the shock of a bullet felt; there was only the numbness at first. He said stiffly, "You said I'd sold myself on being big. I'm not too big for the bed-bugs."

He expected anger or defensiveness; she only said, "I hope that's so."

He left her standing at the gate, her face white and indistinguishable and that silly hat askew from her dismounting; but only her voice was crying. "Good night," she said.

AND when he'd returned the rig to the livery and come back to the Longhorn, something massive stirred in the shadows of the gallery, for Happy Cryder was here. But this was no surprise, not really.

Cryder said, "You have a moment, friend?"

"For what?"

"For talk. I've got a job of work for you."

"I don't deal cards. And I don't throw drunks out of fancy saloons."

"This would just be a chore to pass the time while you're waiting for the stage, friend." Paper rustled in the darkness. "Here's half of a hundred-dollar bill. You get the other half when Austin Langley climbs on the morning stage."

Considine looked across the street; light still burned in the brick shell. "The banker?"

"The banker."

Considine took the proffered paper. "It's tobacco money. You only want him run out?"

"Too scared to come back."

"Be at the stage tomorrow morning with the other half," Considine said and went down the steps and across the street.

He found Langley inside the building, seated upon a saw-horse with a builder's plan spread across his lap and his head bent to catch a lantern's feeble light. He saw that Langley was smaller than he'd first seemed, a man past his prime, a man transplanted to this raw land; and when Langley looked up at him, the light reflecting from his spectacles, Considine judged that the man's voice would be mild.

Langley said, "Ah, good evening. You're Mr. Considine, of course."

Considine said, "Be on the stage tomorrow morning."

"Why?" Langley asked.

Considine made a flat, impatient gesture with his hand. "Maybe I don't like brick bank buildings."

Langley said, "Has it ever occurred to you, Mr. Considine, that this Western prairieland has an architecture peculiarly its own—false-fronts? And has it struck you how ridiculous they are in a land where the winter winds blow strong? When a man builds here, he should build solidly."

Considine shook his head. "Be on the stage," he said again.

"Ah!" Langley said. "Cryder. Can't he see he's making a mistake? If half the town's for him, then half is against him. I don't count for a great deal, Mr. Considine. But run out, I start people thinking."

"I ran a ranch once," Considine said. "In Wyoming. It was a little ranch, but I might not have walked away from it if I'd had a bank to back me. But the bank was for the big boys, the ones who didn't need it. The banker talked about collateral. I didn't have any."

"I see, Mr. Considine. Perhaps it was you who didn't look like a good investment."

"Be on that stage," Considine said and turned his back to Langley and went through the doorway.

He expected Cryder to be waiting, but Cryder was gone from the Longhorn's gallery; this was one man's homage to another's skill, but it touched Considine's

vanity only briefly, for she was here. She moved out of the shadows and came close, and he could feel the warmth of her, but he could feel her trembling, too.

She said, "You could still change your mind."

He said slowly, "I see it now. You knew I was in town—everybody did. And you knew Cryder would try hiring me, so you tolled me away. A girl doesn't get a hat shop by saving pennies. Langley's backing you."

"No," she said. "Cryder's backing me."

He said, "So—?" not understanding.

"It's Cryder's town. He's good to us, and he never quits smiling. When we need money, he has it. He doesn't want competition, though. I've managed to keep the interest paid and hack away at the principle. Cryder's never pushed me. But some night he'll come tapping at my door. To collect."

"And you want me behind that door?"

She shook her head. "It wouldn't be tonight. No, that was to keep Cryder from you till stage time. I want Langley left alive."

"Friend of yours?"

"He's never seen me, not really. He never will. I tried to tell you up on the bench. This town needs more brick and less frame."

He looked toward the outskirts where her house waited. "It means this much to you?"

"What else have I got," she said wearily, "that I could buy you with?"

He said, "You'd better get along now."

"You just saw Langley," she said. "That means you saw Cryder. You're going through with it?"

ANGER touched him. When only the small things were left a man, he magnified them; and his own kind of pride was such a thing. "There isn't any other way in the world that I'm for sale," he said.

He shouldered into the Longhorn, but he paused at the desk and asked for a newspaper—any newspaper; and when he got to his room, he crumpled the pages and strewed them on the floor between door and bed. No man would walk here without his knowing, and he was remembering Langley. When a man had Langley's

surety, there had to be guns behind it. So thinking, he fell into bed, but sleep was long in coming to him...

He took his breakfast at the Longhorn and came to the gallery an hour after sunrise and sat listening to the sounds of a town awakening. Somewhere a pump creaked; a Chinaman down the street swept the boardwalk before his restaurant, and after that pots and pans clattered; men began appearing; a dog walked the dust between the two rows of false-fronts, and the first breeze came to stir the dust. Cowland's citizenry drifted by, watching Considine from the corners of their eyes; but now there was more than last night's empty curiosity, and he knew the word had got around, as it always did.

He thought: *Half of them are for Cryder and half are for Langley, but nobody will lift a hand; and this time he pitied them, knowing they would never find a quarrel truly their own until it was too late.*

Still, he could feel a growing tenseness; and it became almost tangible, a wall against which he must shoulder. He looked for Cora. She had stood between him and sleep last night, but he couldn't see her millinery from where he sat; nor could he see the garish front of the Fandango. It was the brick shell he watched, and an hour passed and another, and then men came and saws began whining and hammers beat a tattoo, and he could see movement through the window casings.

After a while, Langley came. He walked along briskly, preoccupied; and when he drew abreast of the new building, his glance lifted across the street, but it was impersonal. He stood thus for a moment, a small, meek man, and then went into the bank. Still Considine sat.

Down at the stage depot, there was a flurry of sound; and Considine tuned his ears to this, remembering that he himself was to be on that stage; and he became edgy until he pitted a practiced patience against this. Each man performed his tasks by rote—the Chinaman at his restaurant, and the men with the hammers and saws; and Considine had his trade. The stage clattered along the street, rolling the dust and sending the solitary dog ky-yi-ing. Considine watched the stage go and thought: *Another day in this damn*

town! He got to his feet and crossed to the center of the street and stood there.

"Langley!" he called.

The banker came to the naked doorway; there was no substance to him; the breeze could have lifted him away like a dead leaf. "Ah, yes," he said.

"I told you to be on that stage, Langley!"

Langley inclined his head, saying nothing; and now there was no man in this street but Considine, but every doorway sprouted a head, and every window; and this last long moment ran out.

"You own a gun, Langley?"

"At home."

"Go get it."

"No," said Langley.

Anger stirred Considine. "I wanted you to have that much chance. I'm done with fooling." He reached for his own gun and got it into his hand. "You might have gone out by stage; now you'll walk. Get started!"

"No," said Langley.

The anger grew and blossomed in Considine, but here was the first shaking of his surety; these things had to go by rote—the boardwalk's dust responded to a broom, the plank and the nail bent to the wish of the saw and the hammer, but a stubborn passivity was not according to the book. A man either fought or ran, yet Langley was doing neither; and the gun spoke in Considine's hand, though he had no consciousness of bidding it. Dust lifted from the brick wall near Langley. The gun gave voice again; the false-fronts caught the echo and flung it back and forth; but still Langley stood.

Langley said, "It won't do, you know. I'm not going."

Considine's eyes wavered, and the sun seemed stronger than it should be, and his world was narrowed down to the bank's doorway and that small figure, the little man and the brick around him. Considine looked away, sure that Langley carried no hide-out gun; he looked over his shoulder and saw the Fandango and glimpsed that vast waistcoat beneath the wooden overhang of the porch; he saw the millinery shop and Cora's face, white as last night, in the doorway; she wasn't wearing the hat and her hair was the color

he'd guessed. He looked again at Langley and all that fool talk came back to him—the talk Cora had made and Langley had made, the talk of two kinds of buildings. And now he saw there were two kinds of men as well, those with solidness to them and those with fancy fronts; and for the first time he wondered which kind he was.

AND then, because he knew, and because the knowledge was blighting—something from which a man would turn his face—he put his gun away and put his back to Langley and walked to where his voice would carry to Cryder.

"The deal's off," Considine said and plucked the torn hundred-dollar bill from his pocket and let it drift to the dust.

Cryder kept his smile, but his eyes were angry. "So you're yellow," he said.

It came to Considine what a fine target that waistcoat would make, and he knew that here was a man who could be forced to fight, for that kind of pride would be part of the flamboyant front. But there was no need to topple Cryder—Considine could see that now—for when the strong winds blew, as they always blew, only solidness would stand.

He took his eyes from Cryder and paced on down the street until he was abreast of the millinery where he could see Cora's face clearly; but there was no reading it, not yet. He came closer. He said, "There's one thing I've got to know. Would you have gone through with it last night?"

"Not after you spoke your piece," she said. "I couldn't have stood knowing what you'd have thought. I wasn't strong enough for that."

He looked at her and all the fighting he'd ever done seemed foolish fighting, compared to hers, and all the courage he'd ever shown, less than nothing. He said, "I own a ranch down in Wyoming. It isn't much, but it can be built into something. I think this town can get along without you now."

Laughter came back to fill her voice. "Just a minute till I pick out a bonnet," she said. "Not that one I wore last night. That was a hussy's hat for a hussy's work. But there's one that will keep the sun off my face while I tend the garden."

UNDER THE NOOSE OF THE LAW

By

EMERSON KAAPCKE

What can a gun-shy guy do when he has a death-dealing date with a trigger-happy killer?



The gun in his hand roared.

TIM RIORDAN stared at his brother out of his good eye. Charlie Riordan, big and rangy and four years older than Tim, was buckling on his gunbelt.

"It's suicide, Charlie! There's only one man in the county that can outdraw Burke Cowley—and that's Sheriff Whiteside. Why don't you leave it to him?"

His brother finished with the belt and reached for his Stetson. "Because there'll never be any evidence—that's why. The

beef'll go on disappearing, and any man unlucky enough to catch the thief will get a bullet between the eyes. It's a good thing Ole lived long enough to tell me who shot him—though I'd always known it would be Cowley."

Charlie Riordan slammed out across the porch, headed for the corral. Tim got up and followed him, shouting, "Hey, wait for me!"

As he trotted across the yard, Tim reached up to adjust the leather patch

which covered his right eye. He had lost its sight three years before when an old six-shooter had exploded in his hand during target practice, leaving him handicapped not only with a sightless eye but with a fear of firearms which had made him too gun-shy to handle a weapon. This was why he himself went unarmed as he followed his brother to the corral and saddled up.

Knowing that Charlie Riordan was beyond further argument, Tim held his silence during the swift ride through the sage country to Prairie City, where his brother intended to confront Burke Cowley with his crimes as he sat in O'Hare's saloon.

As they dismounted and tied to the hitchrail in front of O'Hare's, Charlie said to him, "Better keep out of the way."

Charlie shoved through the batwings, Tim behind him. Inside, he stopped momentarily and looked around. A half-dozen men loitered in the saloon, drinking at the bar or playing cards at the tables. At the back, battered hat shoved back from a swarthy face, Burke Cowley sat playing a two-handed game with Lon Whiteside, the sheriff. Whiteside was a tall, heavy-shouldered man with a reputation for toughness. But he saved that toughness for use only when there was a clear need for it in the enforcement of the law. Meanwhile he mingled with the other men of this area, clean and suspect alike, on terms of absolute impartiality.

Charlie shouldered his way past the men at the bar to a spot not far from Cowley's table. He planted his hands on his hips, his right hand inches from his gun-butt.

"Cowley!" he rapped out.

The swarthy man glanced up leisurely from his cards, surveyed Charlie's form without emotion.

Tim pressed his back against the bar, gripping its edge tightly in his hands. A hope went through him that the sheriff would stop this thing, that Charlie would make an appeal to the law before courting death.

Charlie went on. "Cowley," he said, "Ole Swenson, one o' my hands, died this morning. He was shot last night. But before he died, he told me the name

o' the man who shot him." Charlie let his words hang on the air for a moment before resuming. "Cowley, some of us have waited a long time to catch up with you."

Burke Cowley stared back at Riordan. Then he answered. "Too bad Swenson didn't live to tell his story in a courtroom."

Charlie Riordan's glance narrowed. "That won't be necessary, Cowley. Your confession'll do just as well."

Charlie's hand reached for his gun. The sheriff started to say, "Hold on—" Suddenly there was an eruption of motion on the other side of the table, and Burke Cowley had thrust his chair back, leaped to his feet, and snaked out his low-slung .45 all in one swift movement. The gun in his hand roared. Charlie Riordan, his weapon still only half out of the holster, stumbled forward and sagged to the floor. He lay there, a thin stream of blood trickling from his forehead.

Tim Riordan stared, his good eye wide with horror. Burke Cowley calmly blew the smoke from the barrel of his .45, broke it and inserted a fresh shell, and returned it to the holster. The he sat down and picked up his poker hand from where he had dropped it.

Grief and rage broke over Tim Riordan. He flung himself forward, his fists clenched. "Damn you," he raged at Cowley. "You've murdered my brother!" He turned to Whiteside. "Whiteside! You're the sheriff! You saw the whole thing. Why don't you do something?"

Whiteside sighed wearily. "I saw your brother pull a gun on Cowley, here. And saw Cowley kill in self-defense. That's all." He pushed back his chair and got up. "I guess I better go get the coroner, though." He left.

Tim Riordan stood facing Cowley, his body trembling uncontrollably. He fought to bring his voice out evenly. "Cowley," he said, so low he was almost whispering. "You'll die for this. And for all the other killings you've done. I swear—I'll make you pay."

Cowley, seated again, looked Tim up and down insolently. He gave a short laugh. "A gun-spooked kid like you? You better get some help, son. Some mighty powerful help."

Tim leaned forward tensely. "Listen to me, Cowley. You better not be here tomorrow. 'Cause I'm comin' in that door after you, and I aim to kill you on sight."

Cowley looked Tim in the eye. Tim saw his dark face pale a degree, and knew he had reached him. Finally the man said, "All right, kid. It's your funeral—not mine."

"Three o'clock, Cowley," Tim said, and withdrew. On the way out, he stooped and removed the gunbelt from his brother's body. With Cowley watching, he strapped it tightly around his own hips, and went out the door with the gun's unfamiliar weight slapping at his thigh. Charlie's body would be taken care of by the coroner.

RIDING back to the ranch, the heat subsided in Tim and cold fear came to take its place. He knew that he had committed himself, and that he didn't have a chance against Cowley. Yet, even with the fear, there was no wish to escape. Cowley's career had to end somewhere. If he didn't end it, Cowley might go on for years, rustling and killing with impunity before he made the mistake which landed him in the grip of the law. Tim's only regret was that the chore should fall to him, with his one eye and his dread of guns. Tim pictured how the thing would go the next day. Cowley would be sitting in the same place, Tim knew, having been threatened against it.

Being a good lawman, Whiteside had very little work to do, and his habits were regular. He also would be there tomorrow afternoon. But Tim knew there wouldn't be any business of drawing. He had warned Cowley that he would kill on sight, and Cowley would be prepared to do likewise. The showdown would come the second he appeared in that saloon door, whether with gun in holster or with gun in hand.

At the ranch, instead of turning in at the corral, Tim kept riding, back up into the foothills. He pushed his bronc on up to the old target range, where he had been practicing that day of the accident, three years ago. He had not been there since.

Tying the reins securely to a tree, Tim got down and looked around. He found

an old target still nailed up against a pine trunk. Pacing off a distance, he drew the heavy .45 and checked its load. Tensely, he raised the gun and sighted over the barrel. He felt the sweat from his palm making the butt slippery as he squeezed his finger tighter around the trigger. Suddenly he gripped the trigger convulsively. The gun roared. At the same moment, Tim involuntarily flinched. He gritted his teeth with anger and disappointment at himself. Walking to the target, Tim saw that he had missed completely.

Once again, Tim squeezed the trigger with a spasmodic jerk.

A third time he tried. This time, his hand was shaking so that he could not even line up the gun between his good eye and the target. Strength seemed to drain out of him altogether then, and he sat down weakly, his arms trembling. He leaned his head forward on his knees and began to retch.

At two o'clock the next afternoon, evading the questions of the cook and the two other hands, Tim saddled up, his face white and pinched. He knew the other men would stop him if they knew his errand, so he rode off without a word.

Riding past the front of O'Hare's, Tim peered over the batwings into the gloom inside. The darkness, contrasting with the hot yellow sunlight in the street, was too deep to reveal anything. Tim got down, moving deliberately.

Making no effort to quiet the clump of his boots on the boardwalk in front of the saloon, he strode to the swinging door. He stood there a moment, then shoved the leaves in front of him and stepped forward.

Coming in suddenly out of the bright light, he saw, as if in shadow, Burke Cowley's form rising at the rear of the room, the gun-arm swooping down and up. Clearly, he saw the bright flash as the gun fired. Then the slug hit him in the chest like the blow of an iron fist, and Tim felt himself falling forward.

Tim was still conscious as he hit the floor, but a deeper darkness than the shade of the room seemed to hover over the sight of his one eye as he struggled to hold it open.

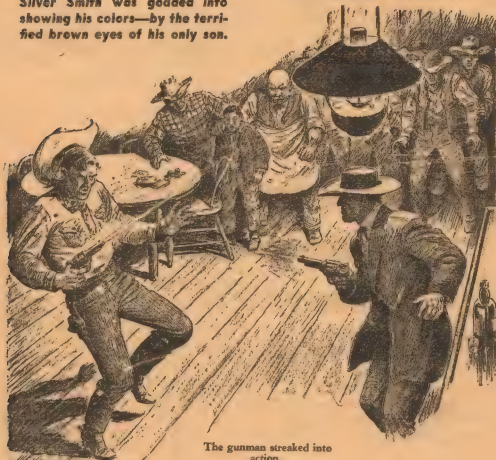
Then he heard a gasp of surprise, and

(Please continue on page 94)

NO LATCH-STRING FOR A LOBO

By **BOB WHITE**

Silver Smith was goaded into showing his colors—by the terrified brown eyes of his only son.



The gunman streaked into action.

SILVER SMITH rode down the main drag of the town he'd departed eight years earlier. It was furnace-hot and he had the brim of his expensive white sombrero pulled down to shade his eyes. Save for a scrawny hound that yipped bravely from the protection of a

shaded alley, the streets were empty and quiet.

He dismounted before the Golden Swan saloon and tied his horse to the wooden hitching rail, then he beat the dust from his fancy blue shirt and corded trousers. Grassroot was the same lifeless town he'd remembered it to be. He pushed up his hat brim and surveyed the Golden Swan. Same old barn, only older and more run

down. He gave his back trail a long, searching look, then went into the saloon.

The bartender, a heavy moon-faced man with more hair in his red mustache than on his head, was wandering listlessly about the empty room kicking chairs into place. The sleeves of his soiled white shirt were rolled high above his elbows and waves of perspiration washed over his fat, shiny cheeks. He gave Silver a tired nod and grunt and plumped around the bar. "What'll it be, Stranger?"

"Hello, Ed," Silver greeted. "Whiskey."

The fat bartender looked at Silver a second time. "Silver Smith. So you come back." He took a bottle and a glass from the shelf behind him and set them on the bar.

"Ain't I welcome?" Silver suggested with a sour smile.

"Oh, sure," Ed replied quickly, but without enthusiasm. "Just surprised me. When'd you get in?"

"Just this minute," Silver stated, draining his glass and blinking tightly as the liquid fire burned through the dust in his mouth and throat.

"Come after the kid?" Ed spoke without preamble.

Silver flushed darkly. "Some of your business, maybe?"

Ed paled and the sweat stood out like tiny globes of clear jelly. "None. None at all." He wiped the bar carefully without looking at Silver again.

Silver turned his back to the bar and rested his elbows on it while he lighted a thin cigar. Two thoughts were uppermost in his mind, getting the kid, his kid, and eluding the hombre that had been camping on his trail for the last three days. He wanted no trouble now after eight years of waiting for his promise to run out.

"Any of the Burke outfit been in town today?" he asked Ed over his shoulder.

"Nope," Ed replied aloofly.

"Hell, don't be sore," Silver said with a grin. He pushed a bottle toward the sweating bartender. "Have one on me."

Ed shook his head. "Ellie and Hickory sure ain't going to be happy to see you."

Silver shrugged. He didn't expect they would be. "I stuck to my end of the bargain. They got no kick coming. Tom will be ten next week." He rubbed his jaw

thoughtfully. Ten. He hadn't seen the boy since he was learning to talk. He felt a vague uneasiness. He'd be a stranger to his own son. "How's Hickory done with his spread? Didn't amount to much when I pulled out."

"Finest in the country."

Silver tasted a fleeting tinge of disappointment and jealousy. He'd expected Hickory to be plodding along on a shoe-string and Ellie sorry she was married to him.

"I've done all right myself," Silver couldn't refrain from saying. "Got the Spanish Spur in Mesa. Best tables in the West." The Spanish Spur was a mighty nice place. The part about owning it was pure lie. Silver only played for the house, but he'd laid away a healthy pile in anticipation of this moment. He had plenty to take him and Tom to Alaska and set himself up in one of the mining towns along the Yukon. That was his dream and he meant to carry it through come hell or high water.

"Hickory spread the word he'll kill you on sight," Ed remarked evasively.

"He ain't man enough," Silver laughed without humor. "Don't tell me my reputation hasn't drifted this far south."

"Heard you gunned a couple fellows in El Paso," Ed admitted.

"Accused me of cheating," Silver mused with bitterness. His honesty at cards was his badge of honor.

Ed laid his two paws heavily on the bar and met Silver's eye. "I'm an old man, so it won't matter too much if you kill me for what I'm gonna say because I'm gonna say it anyhow." The sweat dripped from his chin onto the bar. "You're just a tinhorn, Silver. You take that boy away from his ma you ought to be strung up. Horse stealing and rustling ain't nothing compared to child stealing."

SILVER'S hand clenched until he could feel the nails digging into flesh. He wanted to beat in Ed's fat liquid face, run the words back down his throat. Just a tinhorn. They'd soon see. "Is that all you got to say?"

"That's all right now," Ed nodded, "and I feel a lot better."

Silver tossed some change on the bar. "You're lucky, Ed," he stated flatly.

"Lucky you're still alive." He spun on his heel and walked to the door, pausing as a horseman trotted past on a giant palamino. The rider was small and garbed in black from high-crowned stetson to silver buckled boots. The man looked neither to right nor left. If he was aware of Silver, he made no sign.

Silver stood motionless until the rider had passed, then he stepped outside and watched him ride through town and disappear finally over a distant hill. Thoughtfully, Silver climbed onto his own horse and rode down to the Hardwick Hotel. Carson. It was Rockwell Carson who was trailing him. The little man who had once warned, "When I get healed up I'm comin' after you, Silver, and one of us'll die." Carson was one man Silver didn't want to meet now.

He got a room on the second floor and the first thing he did was take a cold water bath. Then he changed to fresh clothes from his blanket roll and fell across the bed. Carson. He couldn't get the little man out of his mind. He'd gun-whipped Carson once in a fight over cards. Why couldn't he leave well enough alone? Silver had no fight with him anymore.

All his fights had been over cards. They'd been the cause of his leaving Grassroot eight years back when he'd lost his ranch trying to beat a straight flush with three queens. Silver rolled to his feet and contemplated his stocking feet. Ellie had been so mad she'd taken Tom and moved into town with an aunt, and when Silver tried to explain she'd blazed at him with his old buffalo gun. It was two weeks before she'd let him close enough to talk, and then she'd done all the talking.

Silver sighed wistfully. He'd sure missed the kid. Ellie and her fiery, bullying temperament were more easily forgotten. She'd gotten a divorce and married Hickory Burke a few years later anyway.

A knock on the door awakened him several hours later. He slipped to his feet and buckled on his gun. "Come on in."

The door opened and a large, square-faced man entered, his lips taut and his prominent chin out-thrust. He kicked the door shut with his heel and stood facing Silver. "I heard you was back."

Silver nodded warily. "I'm back, Hickory. I reckon you know what I come for."

The cowman's large, rough hands worked at his sides. It was with obvious effort that he controlled his emotions. "You set one foot on my property and I'll kill you."

"Might be you don't know of the agreement Ellie and I made about Tom," Silver said easily. "She's had him for ten years almost. Now it's my turn to have him."

"That was before me and Ellie married," Hickory answered. "I ain't bound by someone else's promise."

"Tom's my son," Silver reminded him.

"Tom's ten times more mine than your'n for all his blood." Hickory's rugged open face was flushed. "I've fed him, nursed him, reared him and watched over him like he was my own." He paused to catch his breath. "That boy leaves only over my dead body."

"If that's the way it has to be," Silver replied coldly. He watched Hickory's hand twitch near his gun. "Don't be a fool, Hickory," he said suddenly. "You'll just be making a widow of Ellie and I'll be taking the kid anyway."

Hickory sobered at this, but the determination remained on his rough face. "I ain't had to practice with a gun to make a living," he said with biting scorn, "but what I said still goes. You step on my property and I'll kill you with my bare hands." He looked at Silver evenly for a moment, then turned and went out.

SILVER stared at the door, listening to the heavy footsteps disappear down the hall. He hadn't quite expected this from the quiet, good-natured cowpoke he'd remembered Hickory to be. But it didn't matter. Silver picked up his beautiful white hat and went out.

It was dusk as he walked along the boardwalk toward the Golden Swan and he passed groups of laughing shouting cowpunchers. It was Saturday night in Grassroot. He paused across from the saloon and stared. At the hitching post among a dozen other ponies stood the giant palamino. Carson had backtrailed.

Silver looked about with indecision. Suddenly he turned and walked slowly back toward the hotel, keeping to the

shadows. Every instinct told him to go to the Swan and face Carson, have it out and over with, but he couldn't make his muscles respond. Life was too sweet now that his years of waiting had come to an end. Maybe he couldn't outdraw the little gunman the second time. There was a cold hand clutching at his insides and knotting his stomach. Fear! He was afraid of Carson.

He tried to laugh it off, explain it away. He'd gunwhipped Carson once; he could do it again. His unwilling feet continued to carry him away from the Swan.

Maybe I am a tinhorn, Silver thought wildly. I let Ed shoot off his mouth to me and I took it. I let that clumsy Hickory tell me he was going to kill me, and I didn't do a thing about it. Silver began to walk faster, trying to outrun his growing shame, trying to escape the unfamiliar terror that was beginning to course about his spine.

He stopped when he reached the hotel. Maybe Carson found where he was staying. Maybe Carson was in there right now, waiting. Silver shivered lightly and turned down an unlit side street.

He walked on and on, avoiding the crowded main drag, trying to gather courage. It's the boy, Silver told himself. He'd never backed down from a fight in his life, why else should he be running from one now? At last he turned and headed toward the livery stable, his mind made up. He'd take Tom yet tonight and ride out of here before Carson knew he was gone. With a night's start, the little killer would never catch up with them.

The stable hand wasn't around and Silver quietly saddled his mount and left by a side trail. He stayed clear of the road and took a short cut through the canyon. In a half hour he was in view of the Burke ranch house.

The front room was lighted up and Silver tied his horse to a tree some distance away. He hitched up his belt and walked silently toward the house. A figure passed the window and Silver halted to glance inside. The figure had been Hickory carrying something heavy in his arms. Silver turned and climbed the steps to the veranda. He hesitated a moment, listening carefully. Then he tried the door. It opened easily and he slipped inside.

Hickory was bending over a chair when Silver's spurs jangled against the plank floor. He spun around in surprise. "Silver!" He clawed at his belt frantically, not realizing in his sudden anger that he was unarmed. Silver unholstered his own gun easily and waved it at Hickory.

It was then that Silver saw Ellie. She was in a chair partly hidden by Hickory's body.

"Hello, Silver," she said softly.

The years rolled back and Silver braced himself for the tongue-lashing he expected to follow. "The time's up, Ellie," he said, wetting his lips with the tip of his tongue. He felt a vague sense of satisfaction that this woman who had once been his wife no longer exercised any hold over him. "I want the boy. Right now."

Hickory stepped forward. Silver cocked the gun with a practiced thumb. The dull click rang empty in the charged atmosphere.

It was Ellie who broke the mood. "Get Tom," she commanded Hickory in a low voice.

Hickory hesitated, then he turned and walked trance-like toward a side door. Silver followed him warily. Suddenly the door opened and a scrawny mop-headed lad stepped out. "I'm up, Daddy," he said to Hickory, staring at Silver with misgiving.

"Hello, Tom," Silver said gently. "I'm your pa. I came to take you with me."

The youngster sidled over to his mother's chair without answering. Hickory clenched his fists helplessly.

"You get into that room with Hickory," Silver ordered Ellie. "I don't aim to have you following right off."

Ellie shook her head. "I won't be following you."

"Get over there," Silver repeated savagely.

"She can't, you fool," cried Hickory. "Her back's been broke. She can't walk a step."

"Then carry her in," snapped Silver, making his voice harsh.

Hickory gave Silver a short look of pure hatred. Then he carefully took his wife in his arms and laid her on Tom's bed.

"Get a coat," Silver told the frightened boy who now clutched his mother's hand.

"Reckon that's all you'll need for the time being."

The boy looked doubtful. "Go ahead, Son," Ellie told him with closed eyes. "He's within his rights."

Silver tied Hickory to a chair. It would hold until someone found him in the morning. Then he took the boy outside and saddled a horse that Tom pointed out dumbly.

THEY rode hard for a ways until the slippery rock of the canyon made them slow down. It was then that Silver realized that the boy was sobbing.

"What's wrong, fellow?" Silver asked soothingly, trying to win over this strange shy boy. The boy turned away and Silver shrugged. No time to brood about it now. The boy would get used to him in a few days.

"We're going to Alaska, Tom," Silver shouted later. "We'll buy a good spot and make a fortune. I been planning this for years." The boy didn't respond and Silver rode over and reigned in his pony.

"Get away," the boy choked out, "I hate you."

Silver released the pony, hurt by the loathing in his son's voice. He bit his lip, perplexed by this unexpected situation, and tried to think of some way to settle the air between them and establish the comradely understanding he had al-

ready taken for granted, but too soon.

In the distance he heard the clack of hoofs on granite and his heart skipped a beat. Quickly he swung off the trail and into the shadow of a boulder. Then the sound died out. The horseman was going the other way. Silver sighed nervously and pushed back his hat. He didn't like this running. He was breathing hard and he laughed to dispel the tenseness that had enveloped him.

"I'm just jumpy," he muttered half aloud. This wasn't going to be fun. It was a long way to Alaska. He tried to make out Tom's face in the darkness. There must be some explanation for his behavior. Silver tried to put himself in the youngster's place, seeing a stranger mistreat his crippled mother and threaten his pa, and then snatch him away, sneaking and hiding in the shadows. Silver began to understand. The boy hadn't seen him in a very favorable light. His own son was ashamed of him.

Unhappily, Silver realized he had but one choice, face Carson and prove to Tom that his old man wasn't just a cowardly tinhorn. With reluctance he turned in the other direction and they trotted back toward town.

His decision gave him little comfort and the icy fear returned and increased as they neared Grassroot. He was a sucker he told himself, not to go on while he



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had the chance. Only the boy's utter dislike of him pushed Silver on. By the time they'd reached the back entrance to the Golden Swan he felt weak and almost helpless. He sat contemplating the closed door with dread, breathing deeply to break loose the tightness that restricted his chest. The boy had stopped crying and now sat mutely on his pony.

"Get down," Silver finally ordered. Tom climbed down stiffly and waited. "Sneak in there and tell Ed to come out here. Don't let no one else see you neither."

"Wait," Silver called, when the boy turned silently to obey. He was doing this to impress Tom with his courage and gunfighting ability. Then Tom should witness it with his own eyes.

At that moment the back door opened and the fat bartender stood outlined in the yellow light. "Well," he said with contempt as he recognized Silver and the boy, "there's a gent inside been looking for you."

"A little fellow in a high-crowned hat?"

"That's him. And I reckon he won't be no pushover like poor, slow-moving Hickory was." He spat in the dust at Silver's feet. "Don't reckon a tinhorn would want to tangle with him."

Suddenly something snapped in Silver. The numbing fear dissolved. He should have seen it sooner. He'd been running from himself. Maybe Carson would get him this time. If it was in the cards he couldn't escape it no matter how fast he ran. He jumped lightly off his horse.

"Bring in the boy, Ed," he said softly, "I want him to see it." He pushed back his hat and strode by Ed into the crowded, noisy saloon. Inside he paused, and hands on hips surveyed the room for his little enemy.

"Silver's come," someone shouted in surprise and the noise stopped as if a great blanket had been lowered over the scene. Every head turned in his direction, then they began to push back silently until one lone man was left, a short man in a high-crowned hat who leaned insolently against the bar and waited.

SILVER began to walk forward, slowly and deliberately. He was aware of the ring of white faces watching ex-

pectantly, their features distorted by the giant oil lamps which swung gently in the tobacco filled air. His own footsteps thudded hollowly, methodically as he advanced. A drunken puncher giggled crazily and fell lifeless and ignored across a sturdy table. Silver was acutely aware of every sound, every movement, without once removing his eyes from Rockwell Carson.

He halted ten feet from the little killer. "Evening, Carson," he nodded slightly. "Looking for someone?" His words, crisp and cold, sounded strained and too loud.

The gunman smiled sadly. "Yeah. You ain't forgot?"

"I ain't forgot," Silver replied.

"That your kid come in with you?" Carson asked unexpectedly, without removing his eyes from Silver.

"That's my kid," Silver assented briefly, not allowing his attention to be diverted. He waited, his hand poised.

"Playing on my sympathy?" Carson went on, still smiling sadly.

In that second Silver realized why Carson hadn't drawn on sight. He wanted more than a killing. He wanted to see Silver humbled, to see him crawl away, safe but shorn of all pride and self respect. Swiftly he considered. He could still escape without risk, take Tom and ride away to where the events of this night would never be known. His eight years of planning could still be salvaged almost whole. He'd sacrificed only the respect of his son.

Rockwell Carson waited for Silver's answer to the unspoken offer.

"Nope," Silver replied. Carson was fast and a killer, but he wasn't afraid. That's all that counted. He was no longer afraid. "I'm ready when you are, Carson."

A fleeting tinge of wonder and disappointment replaced the sad smile, and then the gunman streaked into action.

Silver fired, but not before Carson's slung had torn through his shoulder, spinning him backwards. He blinked and fought back dizziness. He could feel the acrid powder smoke burning at his nostrils and hear loud voices suddenly raised about him. He was faster than me, Silver thought wildly. The weight of his gun became more than he could handle and he

(Please continue on page 95)

BULL-BOATS and FIREWATER

By ROY VANDERGoot

Bull-boats were favored means of travel by mountain men. A bull-boat was made of a pliable willow-stick framework in the shape of a wicker basket and lashed together by buffalo-thongs. Over this was stretched green buffalo hides sewn together with buffalo sinew. Seams were made water tight by sealing them with a mixture of melted buffalo fat and earth or ashes.

A fair-sized buffalo boat was about twenty-five feet long by twelve or fifteen wide, its sides about two feet high. It could carry a load of three tons and draw only ten inches of water, a highly desired feature on rivers as shallow as the Platte.

When the green hides dried, they shrank, pulling the boat into a firm though still pliant shape. The bottom, staying wet, prevented the shrinkage from pulling the framework apart.

Unloaded, it was so light it could with ease be pulled up on the river bank. In cold or inclement weather the bull-boat would be turned upside down, and presto, the mountainman had a roof over his head.

The disadvantage was that the craft was hard to steer. Shaped like a tub and lacking a keel, it spun like a top in erratic currents. It floated like a bubble, and, like a bubble, was highly vulnerable to rough handling and snags and sharp rocks. Even so, hundreds upon hundreds of tons of pelts were transported in them for thousands upon thousands of miles of river travel. All in all, the bull-boat was a bully craft.

Painter Pete was not a painter, he was a trapper. He earned his nickname from his knack in knocking off mountain lions, or panthers, which popular speech called painters. Another thing Painter Pete was good at was in knocking off a pint of whiskey at a single draught. His love for firewater was extraordinary.

One day out in the hills he met up with an Indian who begged him for a drink. Pete indignantly refused. The Indian then offered all sorts of inducements to make Pete part with a slug of firewater, to no avail. Pete remained adamant.

Finally the Indian went so far as to offer to swap his pony and all his outfit for a pint of the stuff he craved so very badly. It was no go. Pete wouldn't swap.

When Pete returned to town to lay in a fresh stock of moisture to see him through the hardships of frontier life, he told a crony about the incident.

"Good Glory!" his friend exclaimed. "A pony for a pint—why didn't you take him up on it? You crazy?"

"Crazy!" blared Pete. "I should say I ain't! That was my last pint. But it sure goes to show how far an Indian will go in his cravin' for liquor."

WEAR MY

Novelette Of Gun-Roaring Revenge

CHAPTER

Return and Revenge

1

The first man to see the kid ride into Injun Bluff blinked his eyes and ran yelling into Abe Freeman's store. A drunk staggered out of the Full House Saloon, took one look and dove back through the batwings. As the news spread, unbelieving faces peered out of doorways and windows.

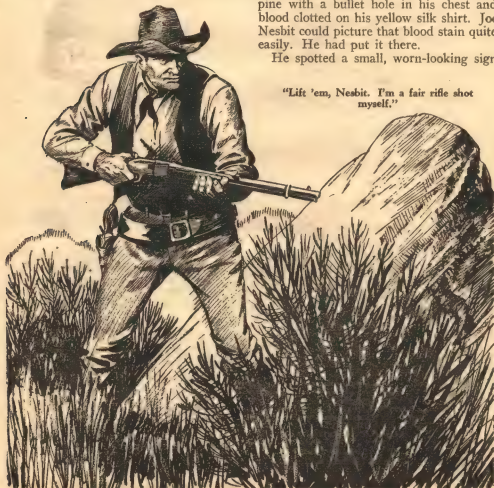
Young Joe Nesbit saw that and won-

dered. He figured that Injun Bluff shouldn't be that surprised at a man with shoulder-length hair and buckskin leggings and a long-barreled rifle across the saddle. But then he was riding a silver-mounted saddle on a big gray with flashing eyes and small, skittering hoofs.

He decided it was most likely the horse that caused the uproar. It was Fancy Frank Kole's gray gelding, and likely, nobody but Fancy Frank had ever ridden it. But Frank Kole had no more use for the gelding. He was lying under a jack-pine with a bullet hole in his chest and blood clotted on his yellow silk shirt. Joe Nesbit could picture that blood stain quite easily. He had put it there.

He spotted a small, worn-looking sign

"Lift 'em, Nesbit. I'm a fair rifle shot myself."



BULLET BRAND!

By
**ROBERT L.
TRIMNELL**



When a guy comes of age, he figures it's long enough for any man to live—if the right people are dead.

that said "Kansas Bill Carson, Sheriff." He rode up to it and tied the gray. Then he slid out of the saddle and walked with a long, panther-like tread up to the boardwalk.

A figure loomed in the doorway, a man with a comfortable paunch and a cowhide vest that hung open over it. A star was loosely pinned to one side of the vest. Kansas Bill Carson was a rather untidy-looking man, even his jowls seeming to droop, and his eyelids hanging heavily. But everybody knew that was the deceiving thing about Kansas Bill. The cedar-handled Colt on his hip could move like the devil was riding it.

"Now that's a bad hoss to steal, Sonny," the sheriff said. He was stoking up a black pipe with an enormous bowl, punching tobacco in with a broad thumb.

"Just temporary," Joe Nesbit said. "Had to get to town, and my own hoss died awful sudden. About three miles toward the river you'll find Fancy Frank Kole. He died awful sudden too." His dark eyes seemed to bite into the sheriff, and his jaw was shoved stubbornly forward.

"Fancy Frank had friends," the sheriff said lazily.

The kid nodded. "Some in Nebraska were so anxious to see him they offered a little prize to whoever brought him in. Dead or alive. That was eight years ago. But I'm no bounty hunter." He dragged a bag of makings from his pocket, rolled a quirly while he stared at the sheriff.

Carson jerked his pipe out of his mouth and his eyes seemed to bug.

"You—ain't—Sam Nesbit's son!"

Joe lit the quirly, let it hang out of his mouth, closing one eye to escape the smoke. "Did you think I'd died off in the last seven years, Sheriff? Sure, Sam Nesbit was my dad. And you can tell that to Dave Rollins, too. Tell him Joe Nesbit has come of age. And tell him Joe Nesbit can bark a squirrel at a hundred yards." He patted the worn stock of his rifle. Then he turned and padded quickly on moccasined feet, swung into the saddle.

"Wait. You know that when we find Fancy Frank's body, we're likely to hunt the man who killed him."

The youngster snorted. "Check your reward doggers, Sheriff. It's no sin to kill

a man who's wanted dead or alive." He headed the gray gelding down the street.

He remembered the barber shop with its red and white painted pole in front. The barber stared at him for minutes, trying to place him. He shrugged and pointed to the chair. Joe got into it, leaned his rifle against his knee. "The works," he said. Meaning the shoulder-length hair and soft stubble beard. He faced the door and kept one hand caressing the shiny barrel of his rifle.

It was two hours later when he came out of the Injun Bluff hotel. His hair was short, his face clean shaven and he wore a new, checked wool shirt. A shiny new six-gun was at his hip. Joe stopped on the porch a minute, rifle in the crook of his arm. He scanned the street for familiar faces. Then he saw two men riding down the street, leading a pack horse. A body was draped across the horse, one with a bright yellow shirt and fine gray whipcord trousers, with a scarlet stitching down the sides. Fancy Frank. The gaudily-dressed man had a further addition to his costume now. Dried blood on his shirtfront. Joe glanced once more at the body, then turned up toward the Full House Saloon. He swung in through the batwings.

A few men glanced at him, quickly turned to their neighbors and whispered out of the corners of their mouths. Word had preceded him. He was the man who had gunned Fancy Frank Kole in the chest. Not one of them would have stood up to Kole's guns, let alone risk those of the man who had punctured that yellow shirt of Kole's. A couple of hours after arriving in town, Joe Nesbit found himself being regarded as a man as deadly as a rattler. Deadlier, because they didn't know if he'd rattle before he struck.

"Beer," he told the bartender. He glanced at himself in the long mirror that hung over the bar. Clean shaven, rather neat in the new shirt. A long, rawboned face and gray eyes that bored right back at him. There was grim determination in those eyes. There had to be. The job he'd cut out for himself called for it.

THE bartender was a wispy man with darting eyes. He slid the beer across and threw a whisper of advice with it. "Don't make buzzard bait of yerself, boy.

Yuh can't break Dave Rollins. 'Sides, he's got the old spread nailed down legal as you please. I say that because I was Sam's friend." After that he clammed up, stuck out a palm for payment for the drink. Joe stared at him for a moment, slipped a coin from his pocket. He laid it on the man's palm.

"Thanks, friend." Then he raised the glass of beer and emptied it down his throat. He peered over the rim of the glass into the mirror to take stock of himself again. Maybe his nerves were taunted by returning to Injun Bluff. He didn't take time to figure. He dropped to the floor. Something sang over his head, crashed into the mirror. Glass shattered.

Joe came up out of the crouch and spun toward the man who had thrown the knife. A bristly beard and small, red-rimmed eyes. A squatty man, leaning forward with long, ape-like arms dangling. Joe knew him. A picture flashed through his mind, a picture out of the past. Haze Lovet, leaning forward like that after just throwing a knife. And Sam Nesbit's foreman going down with the hilt of a knife protruding from his shirt.

Joe flung himself forward in a tiger-like rage, even forgetting his rifle. His shoulder caught Lovet in the belly, and they crashed into a litter of tables and chairs, slamming into the far wall. He drove a fist into the man's jaw, and twisted as it landed. The man's bullet head cracked on the floorboards. He lay still.

Joe pushed up to his feet, hitched up his gunbelt. His gaze swept the men around him. Every one seemed to back a step. Joe marched over to where his rifle lay, cradled it in his arms. He glanced at the cracked mirror. The knife had struck where the reflection of his face had been. He turned to the crowd.

"I can't kill a man when he's already down. But tell that squatty knifer that it's open season, knife or gun. And anybody that sees Dave Rollins, you can warn him. Warn him to head back for Nebraska. Because Sam Nesbit's son just came of age. Which he figures is long enough for any man to live, unless the right people are dead. You tell him."

He turned toward the door, and the long barrel of his rifle swept the crowd.

Outside, Joe took the precaution of

moving against the wall and surveying the street. Maybe he'd talked a little big in the saloon. He meant it, but still, he had to be careful. You didn't even up old-time scores by taking lead in your back.

Satisfied that the street was pursuing its usual course of business, Joe walked down to the Cattleman's Association office. He swung inside, closed the door behind him. Then he pushed over to the corner of the counter and the wall, where he could watch the single window.

A young man with long sideburns goggled his eyes from behind the counter. Joe asked him, "How much it cost nowadays to register a brand?"

"Two dollars."

"Then take up the old S-bar N brand. Sam Nesbit. Put it under the name of Joe Nesbit." He pulled a small roll of bills out of his pocket and laid two dollars on the counter.

The man with the sideburns went to a back room, rumaged around and came out with some papers. "Where will this brand operate from?"

Joe hesitated. Finally he said, "Fred Newbar's Two Q."

A few minutes later he emerged from the office, tucking a bunch of papers into his pocket. He picked up Fancy Frank's horse, slipped into saddle and hit the trail for Fred Newbar's Two Q.

He didn't know for sure if S-bar N would operate from Fred Newbar's. It was good as anything to tell the Association man. But Newbar had been Sam Nesbit's best friend. Joe and Fred's daughter Frances had grown up together, had ridden on the joint S bar N and Two Q roundups. That was seven years ago.

Seven years ago it had been a dry year, the last of a series of dry ones. Old Sam Nesbit had taken a mortgage with the Injun Bluff bank. The bank hadn't wanted it; they didn't consider his or any other ranch a good risk in those days. They sold the mortgage with a sigh of relief to Dave Rollins, of the Chain Bar spread.

Both Sam Nesbit and Fred Newbar were bothered by the idea that too many cows of their markings showed up in Rollins' herds. It smacked of rustling. And the thin-lipped hands that Rollins hired matched well with the idea. The two of them had brought suit in court against

the Chain Bar gang. It was settled out of court, you could say. The cattle war left no witnesses, except for young Joe Nesbit. Rollins' gun hands descended on the S bar N valley spread and wiped out every man. Somehow, Fred Newbar had managed to save the youngster. He sent him to the mountain ranch of a cousin, and there the boy had stayed for seven years. Trapping and hunting had been as much a part of the life in the scanty uplands as ranching. A rifle and moccasins became as much a part of Joe's life as a six-gun and high-heeled. It was good training—for revenge.

He had never forgotten. His hate of the Rollins gang seemed to double each year. When he came of age he rode off. Long since, Dave Rollins had foreclosed the S bar N mortgage, absorbed the herd into his own. But that only helped build Joe Nesbit's hate to a white heat. It gave him one desire in life. Bloody revenge.

JOE topped a rise that overlooked the Newbar spread. Below stretched the grassy Two Q acres, splotched with fat white-faced cattle. In a cluster of trees lay the whitewashed Two Q ranchhouse, and beyond it the sturdy outbuildings and horse corrals. Joe scratched his head. So Two Q was still going! That didn't make sense. He knew Dave Rollins' greed. And now that Rollins had S bar N, his two spreads were like great arms surrounding Newbar's place. Yet, the ranch still stood. And it looked prosperous. Puzzled, he pushed his pony down into the valley.

The front door to the ranchhouse was opened wide, as usual. Newbars were friendly people. Joe tied the borrowed pony and walked up on the porch, footsteps soft in his moccasins. He stopped as a figure came into the doorway.

"Joey!"

It was Fred Newbar. The old rancher stood straight in the doorway, straight as ever, and in clothes as neat as ever. But there was something about his face that puzzled Joe. Deep creases in his broad forehead, a droop to his mustache that Joe hadn't remembered.

They shook hands, Fred grinning widely. Then the grin disappeared, and Fred led him over to the edge of the porch. They sat down. The rancher offered makings. In silence they rolled cigarettes.

"I heard about Fancy Frank. One of my men just got back from town."

Joe puffed smoke, slowly. "I met him on the road to Injun Bluff. I was figurin' to tell him to reach for his gun. I hadn't forgot how he and Rollins gunned Pop down. But he figured things out before I told him. He drew. He didn't figure the rifle I was carryin' could possibly match his Colt speed."

Fred nodded. He blew out a fine stream of smoke. "Lot of your dad's hot-headedness in yuh, Joey. I saw it when you came up the porch. I didn't recognize you right off, but I saw your dad's mark. Didn't have to figure far to know who it was."

Joe stared at him. There was something odd in the rancher's voice. "Your gettin' along with Rollins?"

Fred glanced at him, then looked away. "Yeah," he said.

Joe stamped out his cigarette. "You got fat land and fat cows. That don't add up, with Rollins havin' land all around you."

"It adds up." There was something weak and lost in the rancher's voice.

Joe heard a step behind him. A light youthful step. He turned, then shoved to his feet. He knew his mouth was hanging open. He was glad that he'd been to the barber shop, and had a new shirt on.

Frances Newbar was maybe a year younger than he. She was slender, and tall like her father. It was the soft brown eyes, the loose fragrant hair that he saw first. He remembered the slightly turned-up nose. But it was no longer that of the girl he had known. Frances was a woman now. It hit him as a kind of shock.

"Hello, Frannie."

She recognized him almost with an explosion. Suddenly she ran forward, threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. It was an impetuous kiss, and Joe stood with his arms hanging dumbly at his side. The kiss of a childhood playmate. That was the idea. But when he felt the soft lips, and the warm fragrance of her hair wafted into his nostrils, he knew they were no longer children.

She pushed away just as impulsively. "My, you've grown, Joey!"

She jumped down and sat between them. Suddenly her face darkened as she remembered something.

"You killed Fancy Frank this morn-

ing. We have just heard the news."

He nodded. "I killed him. He deserved a public hanging. But it's better this way. Every minute he lived was too long."

Fred Newbar pushed to his feet. "Got some things to look after," he muttered. He walked away in the direction of the horse corral. There was a weariness in the slouch of his shoulders, and a kind of stumbling in his walk.

She whispered, "I hate to say this. But I'm glad you killed Fancy Frank." She glanced at him, then away. "I guess that's an awful thing to say. But the way he used to look at me, if it weren't for Dave Rollins—"

He puzzled up his brow. "Something funny here, Frannie. What's Dave Rollins got to do with this?"

She glanced at him again, then lowered her eyes. "Oh—well, Dave kind of likes me, and—" She broke off. "What do you intend doing here, Joey?"

He set his lips hard. "Kill Dave Rollins. Then I'm going to get my spread back. Dad would want me to run it, if he couldn't. He died fighting for it."

"How do you mean to go about it?"

He grinned. "Same way Rollins got started on S bar N. I'm going to get a branding iron and run it on his calves. It's spring, and there should be hundreds around." He pushed to his feet. "See you, Frannie." And he was in the saddle and gone.

CHAPTER

2

Fighting Words

The S bar N ranchhouse had fallen into disrepair. It seemed to be used as an outpost of Rollins' spread. Joe rode Fancy Frank's horse to a barn and got a couple of branding irons that hadn't been used for years. They were hung up on the wall in neat order. The way Sam Nesbit used to keep things. The Chain Bar men had been too lazy to shift them. No point in disturbing old irons anyway. S bar N was dead, they figured.

In a few minutes Joe was riding north. The familiar hills came back to him, and he knew that in a few days he'd remember every gully and ridge, every place where a man might watch the land around him and every place where he could hide. He'd

grown up in these hills, and his knowledge of them was not surpassed by that of any man who roamed them. He puffed up his chest a little, felt the smooth barrel of his rifle, reached a hand back to where the pair of branding irons hung over his saddlebags. He traced his fingers over the S bar N of the brand. Never had that mark been used as a running iron. Well, things had changed. His first idea had been to gun down Dave Rollins. But there were things to do first.

He thought of Fred Newbar's attitude. What was wrong with the old rancher? And why did his spread live so fat and strong, with the octopus arms of Dave Rollins' spread all around it? Fred was his father's old friend, and it didn't make sense that he'd side with Rollins. But Joe knew one thing. His childhood friendship with Frannie was not dead. He had seen something in her eyes that reflected what he felt in his own heart. Someday he was going to marry that girl. Some day when he was master of S bar N.

Dave Rollins was a big man, over six feet and with bull-like neck and shoulders. A handsome man, in a rough-cut sort of way, with his black hair and black brows hanging over cold blue eyes. He could be a man of terrible fury, too. He showed it that day when he and Haze Lovet rode out to check the calf-drop, in preparation for spring roundup.

"Another one, Haze," he rasped. The bawling, white-faced calf was just healing from a week-old brand. The brand did not match that of the cow that snorted when Rollins came too close to it. S-N, it read. Stamped with a clean iron, by a practiced hand.

Rollins let out a stream of curses. He gouged spurs into his horse, and the animal snorted with pain, tried to pitch him off. He subdued it with cruel yanks at the curved bit.

"Damn that dirty son! We've combed the hills for that Nesbit!"

Lovet spat. "And lost two men doin' it. One with a rifle bullet in his shoulder and the other just plain scared out of his job. That damn kid's got more fight than his old man. And old Nesbit was the hellinest old devil I ever saw."

It was when they cut into a gully that they found the steer hide. It hung from

the lowest branches of a jackpine, stretched out so nobody could miss it. Rollins rode up close, saw his own name on it.

It was written with a red-hot nail, from the looks of it. Burned on the hide with a scrawling, yet firm hand.

"Rollins. Branded number 95 today. Figure there were 500 on S-N when you started in. When number 500 is branded, I'm going to kill you. The steer tasted good. Joe Nesbit."

Rollins slammed a hand to his six-gun, whipped it out and blew the steer hide away from the tree. "Damn him! I'll nail his hide up like that some day!"

It was the next day when Joe Nesbit spotted four riders driving a small herd. For a minute his heart missed a beat. They were beginning to brand the spring drop which would mean that he'd never get that five hundred brands on clean calves. Then he smiled. The cowhands were driving the stock into Little Bottle Canyon. It had been used for a branding corral many times. Little Bottle was true to its name. A small, rock-walled place with a narrow outlet. He watched them swing several hundred head, mostly mothers with calves, into the canyon. Good.

He slipped out of the saddle, carrying his rifle in one hand and the two branding irons in the other. There was a little rocky cliff on one side of the canyon mouth, maybe thirty feet above the rocky floor. He moved like a panther through the brush. He took up the post and waited while they forced the herd in. Little Bottle had its advantages. A horse couldn't leave it, except for the narrow mouth that he now commanded.

The four riders were at last satisfied with what they had driven into Little Bottle. In a bunch, carrying branding irons, they moved into the mouth of the canyon.

"Just hold it, boys."

The four looked up. Haze Lovet slapped a hand to his holster. Then he withdrew it. A rifle muzzle was peering down his throat.

"Drop your saddle guns and gunbelts," Joe rasped out to them. "And those Chain Bar irons you got, too."

Lovet sprayed the ground with tobacco juice. He scowled up at the rifleman. But

the others had heard of Joe Nesbit. Hastily they unfastened their gunbelts, slid their rifles out of their saddle boots and dropped them to the ground. Haze grumbled, but after a minute's hesitation he too peeled off his armaments.

"Yuh got plenty nerve right now," Haze growled.

Joe threw his two S-N irons down to them. "Go to work, boys. If those calves aren't branded by sundown. I'm going to shoot a few of you. You can't get out of this canyon without climbing, and that means you're going to be afoot. I'll chase down any man that tries to crawl out. Remember that. Now get to work!"

Joe sat with his back to a rock and made a quirk. He grinned as the four rode sullenly down the canyon and built a fire. He watched them lay his irons down with the brands in the flames to heat. Just to make sure they didn't loaf, he sent a rifle bullet whistling over their heads. He decided that it would be a big job to do all the branding he intended to do alone. Might as well have some help, especially since it was men on Dave Rollins' payroll.

A little before sundown he went out and got his horse. All afternoon he had watched cows and calves straggle out through the bottleneck, cows wearing Chain Bar, calves with bright new S-N marks on their flanks. He rode in to the midst of the branders. There were few cattle left in the canyon, and he figured it would be best to get clear before the dark gave Haze Lovet a chance to play tricks. He pulled up before them, and sat in the saddle, grinning.

"Haze, I ought to take you to the sheriff for brandin' somebody else's cattle." He glanced at the sweating, grimy faces on the four men. He saw the long-bladed knife still stuck in Haze Lovet's belt. "Bet you'd like to reach for that, eh, Haze?" He swung the rifle muzzle around toward the squat man's half-bearded face. "You'll get a chance, but not now."

Haze put his hands on hips and gave a crooked, broken-toothed smile. "You're red hot now, aren't yuh? Maybe you're a little boss on the range, Nesbit. But you won't show your nose for the weddin'."

Joe's eyes narrowed. "What wedding?"

"Rollins. And Newbar's daughter."

Joe just sat there in the saddle and stared at Lovet. There was a taunt in the

man's voice. But there was also the ring of truth.

"Kind of had ideas of puttin' your own brand on that filly, eh?" Lovet said.

Joe reached down, picked up his branding irons and wheeled his horse. He rode full speed out of the canyon. Mostly, he wondered how long it would take to get to the Newbar ranchhouse. A couple of hours. He had done a lot of thinking since he had taken to running a brand. Thinking of he and Frannie when they were kids. He had brought accounts up to date, and wondered where the trail led. That was why he had to see her tonight. If she wanted to marry Rollins, well that was it. If not, maybe he fitted into the picture. He picked out a cache for the irons and hurried the gray toward the Newbar place.

LIGHT was streaming out of the kitchen window when he got to the ranchhouse. Joe ground-tied the pony, unslung his rifle and crept up under the window. He settled down to listen.

There was a murmur of voices. Sheriff Kansas Bill Carson's voice broke through the rest.

"No. I got a letter from Nebraska today. Fancy Frank was wanted dead or alive. The kid's inside the law. I got no time for bounty hunters, but he's due for a reward. The law here has just quit chasin' Joe Nesbit."

Joe stuck his head up, found a fringe of vine next to the window. He used it for cover as he peered into the kitchen. Frannie was there, leaning against the wall, with her arms crossed in stubborn fashion. Kansas Bill was leaning back in his chair, eyes drooping as he looked lazily at Dave Rollins. Fred Newbar sat at the other end of the table, a worried expression on his face.

Rollins' voice came out cold and flat. "He's been rustling my cattle. You've seen the brands, Carson."

Kansas Bill lit his cigarette, stared at the rancher through droopy eyelids, over the rising tobacco smoke. "Sure, I've seen them. But I know you've got no love for the kid. Maybe you put 'em on yourself, just to let him in for some trouble."

In spite of himself, Joe Nesbit almost laughed. But it wasn't a laughing matter. At last Kansas Bill had Rollins pegged for

what he was. And that could be dangerous for the sheriff. Joe heard the front door open, and he sidled around the house. He heard Dave Rollins getting his horse. He chanced a look out, saw the rancher pounding his pony off in the direction of Chain Bar. Joe thought for a minute, then hurried up on the porch and into the house. He stopped in the kitchen doorway, rifle in the crook of his arm.

"You're wrong, Sheriff. Rollins isn't brandin' those calves. I am."

The paunchy sheriff pushed half-way up out of his chair, thought better of it and sat back down. Joe saw Fred Newbar's mouth drop open. Frannie's face relaxed into a soft, warm smile.

"Maybe you don't know just what happened on S bar N seven years ago," Joe went on. "Fancy Frank and Dave Rollins killed my dad in cold blood, I saw that. And I saw Haze Lovet slam a knife into our foreman. The rest of the hands cleared out. I don't blame them. But Fred Newbar knew it. And he was too yellow to go to court about it." He fixed a dark stare on the rancher. Fred paled, kept his lips shut grimly.

Kansas Bill took the cigarette from his mouth. "Story was the Chain Bar men were defending water rights. Then they took over the mortgaged ranch in legal enough fashion."

Joe grinned at him. "Sure. Legal enough. But ask Fred Newbar why he sent me up to his cousin's ranch in the mountains. Afraid Dave Rollins would have to defend himself against a fourteen year old kid?"

The sheriff turned to Fred Newbar. "How 'bout it, Fred? You were old Sam's best friend. Bein' in town, I couldn't know what went on out here as well as you."

Newbar scowled. "I didn't see the shootin'. I thought it best if Joe here went away. The shock of his father's death was tough, and no use keepin' him around where he'd be reminded of it."

Joe's eyes went hard. "You lost your fight when they killed Dad. You knew they wouldn't do any killin' for a while, so it wouldn't look suspicious. And then Frannie grew up, and Dave Rollins got his eye on her. She's the price for your safety here, Fred. You'll marry her to Dave Rollins, just to keep your blasted

ranch. And Rollins knows he'll get the spread some day. He's no fool. He lets you live, so you can fatten the place for him."

He swung to the sheriff. "Like I said, I won't kill Rollins until I get five hundred cattle branded. You've got that time to get Rollins indicted for murder, Sheriff. I'll bear witness to the shooting in court. And Fred can say he knew Rollins intended to do it. The fact that he grabbed S bar N should be final proof. If you don't do it, Sheriff, there's goin' to be war between you and me. Get me?" He stared at the lawman for a second, then turned and hurried out of the house.

He grinned a little to himself. It was kind of funny how one man with nothing to lose can stir up such a bunch of trouble. He had a ranch and revenge to gain, and nothing to lose. For, if he didn't win, his life meant nothing.

He hurried toward his horse. It was grazing a hundred yards from the house. As he ran on moccasined feet, he thought of the sheriff, of how the talk had affected him. He was sure of the man's honesty, and knew he could be hell on wheels when aroused. But—

He slid the rifle into the saddle boot. As he lifted his foot to put it into the stirrup, there was a shadow looming out of the bushes. He tried to duck, but something was slashing down at him. His last thought was that a rifle barrel had cracked his skull. Then all was black.

CHAPTER

3

In for the Kill

He felt the roll of a horse under him, and Joe opened his eyes. Below the ground was moving past, his hands were in front, bound tight together with rawhide. From the feel of the saddle under his stomach he knew it was his own horse. Silently he cursed, felt the pounding in his head. He decided to stay where he was, to possum for a while. He heard voices.

"Just shoot him in the back with the kid's gun. Then finish the kid off with his gun, and it'll clear 'em both off for us."

Joe knew the voice. Haze Lovet. And he knew who they were talking about. The sheriff. He knew that Carson had talked his mind too openly. He wasn't at all surprised when Rollins' voice cut into his

ears. These two were setting a trap.

"Two birds with one stone. Then get the wedding over with. Newbar might take a notion to talk the wrong way."

Joe tested the rawhide on his wrists. It was lashed tight enough to cut circulation. He gave up, continued to play possum. Then, in the distance, he heard the patter of hoofs. He felt his horse jerked over, and heard mutters between the two men. "Could be him now," Rollins said. Brush scraped over Joe's back, and he opened his eyes a little. They were moving into a little thicket. And beyond it was what looked like the road to town.

The hoofs came nearer. "I'll get him with the kid's .45," Rollins said. "Stand by with your gun, in case we need it. But I think I'll get him. He's ridin' slow."

Which meant, Joe thought, that they would gun down the sheriff, if that was who the rider was. Then they'd finish him off. Two birds with one stone. Neat. Sheriff dies in fight with outlaw. And Dave Rollins' troubles would be over. Very neat. The hoofs were plopping closer, maybe a hundred yards now. It was only thirty feet down to the trail. He opened his eyes and glanced around. There was quite a bit of high brush. But he couldn't get off that saddle. He might as well be part of it. He glanced up, and for a moment glimpsed the rider. Paunchy, a little stoop-shouldered. It was the sheriff. He heard the click of gunhammers. In a minute now—

His hands touched the oiled leather of the saddle cinch. That band of leather was all that held the saddle on the horse. A crazy plan took form. His fingers were numb from having the circulation cut off. He grabbed the leather loop, tried to ease it out of the buckle. The hoofs pounded closer. There were only a few seconds left. The horse sucked in his breath, his habit when someone touched the cinch strap. It was easy then. Joe slipped the strap clear, held the cinch together with his fingers.

He heard Dave Rollins whisper, "Ready." Joe let go the cinch, disregarded caution and grabbed for the hanging reins. He yanked them as the big rancher said, "Now!"

He yanked the pony around, braced himself desperately to keep the saddle on the horse's back. At the same moment a

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six-gun roared, and there was a yell of pain from the trail. The jolting of a surprised horse on his stomach knocked Joe's wind out for a second, and then the pony was pounding off through the brush. He heard a curse behind, and a shot crashed out, rifled lead through his shirt. He cut the horse again to the right, then the left. For a hundred yards he stayed on. Hoofs began pounding after him. Exuberant yells rang out. They knew he couldn't ride far that way. But he didn't intend to. He found a good, thick-looking bunch of bushes. He rolled, saddle, rifle and all, into the bushes. Scared by the gunshots, his pony crashed on.

For a moment Joe didn't dare to move. Scratched by the brush, wrapped around the saddle, he lay still as death. Two horsemen pounded by, cursing. He allowed himself a grin. Naturally, they thought he was still on the horse. In the dark they couldn't see it well, and the fact that there was nobody stretched across the saddle would take a close look to discover.

As soon as they were past, he yanked his arms up, got hold of his belt buckle. He managed to open it, and pushed away from the saddle. He breathed a sigh of relief at being free from the encumbering thing. He stood there for a minute, trying to figure how to free his hands. No knife. And the leather was tied too tight to work off. Suddenly he yanked his rifle out of the saddle boot, cocked it. Laboriously he stood it up, put the wrist thongs over the muzzle. He slipped a moccasin off, lifted his right foot and caught the trigger with his toe.

He shoved his face back to avoid the blast. Black powder scorched up at him. He let the rifle fall. Ahead, the pounding hoofs stopped. There was a yell. He yanked furiously at the rawhide. Half shot away, it parted. A second later he was rubbing his wrists. Let them come now! He levered a new shell into the rifle chamber, and a grim smile etched into his lips. A couple of mounted men crashed through the brush. He raised his rifle, blasted. A hat spun into the air. The horses wheeled. Suddenly they were gone.

He stayed in the brush for a few minutes. Then he worked his way back to where the sheriff had been bushwacked.

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The lawman and his horse were gone. But on the ground were splotches of blood.

Joe collected his horse and saddle. Then he rode off into the night, lips set in a tight, grim line.

THE next morning Joe struck again at the unbranded calves, wielding his iron with frantic speed. He knew that Rollins would stop at nothing now to get him. And after slipping out of Rollins' trap last night, the big rancher would muster all his strength for a final showdown.

At last Joe could stand it no longer. He had to know how the sheriff had come through the bushwhack treatment. And he had to find what Dave Rollins was planning. The morning air was soft and balmy, but Joe's brow felt cold with a sense of coming trouble, so finally he headed for Newbar's.

He pulled up on a ridge that overlooked the Newbar place. Down in the valley the whitewashed buildings gleamed in the noon sun. A couple of horsemen were approaching the ranchhouse. It was a full two miles, but one looked suspiciously like Dave Rollins, towering high in the saddle. Sweat broke out on Joe's forehead. He glanced anxiously around, at the brush-covered bluffs. He saw the spurt of flame as the fire blasted. And he felt the hot lead burn across his shoulders. He lunged for his rifle, but the voice from the bushes was barbed with quick death.

"Lift 'em, Nesbit. I'm a fair rifle shot myself." It was Haze Lovet!

Joe stiffened in the saddle, and the hand that was reaching for rifle stock froze. He felt blood trickle down his back. He gritted his teeth, and stared into Lovet's pig-like eyes.

"Your play, Lovet," he growled out.

Haze grinned at him and sprayed tobacco juice on the ground. "Damn if it isn't." He cocked the rifle and leveled it up at Joe's face. "Figure I'll hold you here until the weddin's over. Then me and Rollins are goin' to have some fun with you." He glanced down at the knife in his belt.

The meaning was clear.

Joe's shoulders bunched up and the burn across his shoulders began to sting. He glanced down at the ranchhouse again. The two riders were dismounting. One

was a fat man. And Justice of the Peace Hawes was a fat man. At the distance you couldn't tell for sure.

"Frannie won't agree to that," Joe said. Lovet laughed unpleasantly. "No business of mine. Mine's to stop you from goin' down there. Got a dozen men with rifles around this place, and I figure you wouldn't of passed them alive." He sprayed the ground again with tobacco juice. "Git down offen that horse."

Suddenly, Joe climbed to the ground. Frannie was down there in the ranchhouse, about to marry Dave Rollins. He gritted his teeth. Up in the bushes the sun glinted off a rifle barrel. It was a fair distance away. "I see one of your men up there, Lovet."

Lovet glanced up at the rifleman. He jerked a thumb to the rear. "Another there."

"Where?" Joe's eyes were hawk-like on the man's trigger finger. His body was poised like a spring. Haze flicked the thumb over his shoulder. And that was when Joe dove.

One forearm hit the rifle barrel, and head and shoulders plowed into the man's gut. Haze grunted with pain, and there was a sharp snap as Joe crashed his arm up into the foreman's chin. He forced the rifle away with one hand, battered savagely at the tobacco-stained mouth with the other. Suddenly the rifle was loose in his hand. He jerked it, and saw the glint of light on a broad-bladed knife. There was a grin of triumph on Haze's face as he swung it up in a gleaming arc. Joe threw back, felt the blade slash through his shirt and rip along his chest. He swung the rifle, drove it down. Lovet howled a curse and fended it off with his arm. Joe drove the butt straight at his head. Lovet groaned and Nesbit swung again, and the foreman collapsed to the ground like a punctured balloon.

"That for an S bar N foreman that you knifed, Lovet." Joe stared down at the unconscious outlaw for a moment. Then he looked inside his shirt. The rip was not bad, but blood trickled down his chest. Clutching Lovet's rifle, he turned toward the gelding. A rifle slug sang past his cheek. He vaulted into the saddle, drove the horse down the ridge. Another rifle opened up and tore his hat off. Like great

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bees the lead slugs hissed past him. He rode close to the pony's neck, felt the animal leap as hot lead seared his rump. Behind he heard hoarse yells as the bushwackers scrambled for their mounts. They'll be well spread out, he thought. That was one consolation. Covering the whole valley, only a few could get to him at once. He turned and triggered Lovet's rifle, hoping the wild shot would slow them. They answered with a hail of lead. Joe gouged spurs into the horse and hoped he'd make the ranchhouse first. And he knew what to expect there. More hot lead. Grimly he clung to the gelding.

THE minute he slid off the gelding in Fred Newbar's yard he saw Rollins, standing there with his back to a porch post, six-gun leveled at Joe's chest. And a couple hundred yards behind, the Chain Bar hands rode in to back him up.

"This is it, Nesbit. Law's got you at last."

Joe had to grin. "Whose law you roddin', Rollins?"

Frannie came to the door, her eyes large and stained with tears. Behind her was Fred Newbar, his brow wrinkled and puzzled.

"My men'll take you to the jail," Rollins grated out. "Sheriff's got a warrant out for your arrest, for bushwackin' him last night. The boys'll take you in."

Three of Rollins' riders galloped up, yanked Joe's rifle from the saddle sheath and took Haze's gun from his hands. A lanky one growled, "We'll haul him to the jail, Boss." And Joe heard the way he said it. He'd never reach Kansas Bill's jail with those hombres.

He looked up to the porch and saw the way Rollins' finger was quivering on the trigger. He'd shoot if Frannie weren't there. Frannie's eyes had steadied down and she was staring at Rollins. Joe could see hate and fear written in those soft brown eyes. And he knew he'd die before he'd let her marry the rancher.

"That's a lie, Rollins."

It was Fred Newbar. He moved out from behind his daughter, stood with his shoulders stiff and his chin high.

"Take the kid away," Rollins snapped to his men. One grabbed Joe's arms, a

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powerful man that swung him easily toward the gelding.

"This is murder, Rollins," Fred Newbar growled. His mustache shook as he gripped the handle of his holstered gun. "You won't get away with this. You're finished, man, so you might just as well give up."

Rollins swung his gun toward Newbar. Joe saw it move and he spun, grabbed the Colt held by the man next to him twisted the gun away, thumbed hammer back. He saw the powerful man that had been holding him, a big man with a gun in his fist that was dwarfed to toy size. He was fanning hammer too, but Joe fired a split second before the big man's gunhammer could ride down. The man crumpled, and Joe dodged around behind his horse. He heard Rollins' gun roar. Newbar groaned, but Joe saw the oldster claw at his own gun. Then he was too busy to see what happened, for the other two Rollins men opened fire. Lead burned along his ribs. He blasted a slug into the man's chest. And then he heard hoofbeats coming over the crest of the hill.

Newbar was down, still struggling vainly to get his gun. The hoofbeats drew closer, and Joe's heart sank. That would be more of Rollins' men. Grimly he thumbed hammer at the Rollins man who was lining up on him, ducked behind the gelding. Lead burned through the saddle. He came up again, and saw the man was down but Rollins himself was lining up his sights, his black eyebrows knotted and a grin twisting his thin lips as he thumbed hammer, Colt leveled at Joe's head. The hoofs pounded closer behind and Joe's heart flipped. Trapped, he thought. He pulled the trigger of his gun, and the hammer clunked on an empty shell. He hardly heard the rifle bullet that sailed over his head. But he saw Dave Rollins pitch to the ground. A voice roared out behind him.

It was Kansas Bill!

Three men were ranged alongside the sheriff, all townsmen, with rifles in their hands. Carson dismounted and pounded heavy-footed over to where Rollins lay. He stood there, staring down at the wounded man. Rollins pushed up to a sitting position. He glared at Joe and there

WEAR MY BULLET BRAND!

was murderous and undisguised hate in his eyes.

Joe clutched the gelding for support. His strength was going fast as the blood ran out of his wounds. "Give us each a gun, Sheriff," he gasped. "That's the rat that killed my father and I want to even the score."

"Shut up!" Kansas Bill snapped. "Maybe some people around here were afraid of Rollins' guns, but there's such thing as bein' trigger crazy." He walked over to Joe, put his hand on the youngster's shoulder. "Joe, if you promise to put your guns away, I'll help you brand those calves." He turned to Newbar, who was propped up against a porch post, clutching his wounded shoulder.

"You got your just share, Fred, for not talkin' up seven years ago. Like you told me last night, you saw Rollins and his gang wipe out S bar N seven years ago. Obstruction of the law, I'd call it. I spotted Rollins and Lovet in those bushes, dark as it was last night. So that bears it out." He looked out over the grasslands, and saw the Rollins gunhounds turning their mounts away. He half-grinned. "They ain't achin' to stand trial, even for gunhawk pay. Don't figger we'll see much more of 'em."

Fred Newbar grinned sadly at Joe. "I sided in too late, boy. But I'm willin' to give a hand with the sheriff in roundin' up cattle for you."

Joe managed a grin.

"Thanks," he said.

The sheriff walked over to him, began winding Joe's shirt around the wound on his shoulders. His own arm was bandaged and stiff from the wound he had received the night before when he was ambushed by Rollins.

"You puttin' away the guns for good, Joe?"

Joe looked at Frances Newbar and saw the mist in her eyes. She nodded to him. He nodded back, then nodded at the sheriff. Then he was so busy looking at Fran- nie that he barely heard Fred Newbar yelling for the Justice of the Peace to come out from the closet where he was hiding, because now there was a job for him to do.

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 32)

and saw Mrs. Monroe standing by the bed.

"All right," he responded and was surprised again at the far away sound of his voice. "Reckon the Sheriff is ready to go?"

She laughed softly. "He's been gone for several days. As soon as we decided you were going to make it all right, he said he'd better get back to work."

Dave looked at the horseshoe again and wondered how it got there. "Ain't I part of his work?"

"No-o-o, not any more. The Sheriff said no one but a coward would shoot an unarmed man, and you proved to him that you're no coward. I told him how Saunders killed my husband and, well, the coroner's jury decided Saunders' death was an accident."

"You mean—they believe I thought he was drawin' a gun?"

"They believe you. Besides—" She laughed again, nervously, and Dave decided it made a very pleasant sound. "Mr. Hyde says you're not hair-triggered any more. He hung that horseshoe up there."

Dave felt very sleepy, but he cocked one eye at that rusty shoe and grinned. "You and Johnny need help around here? I'm a pretty good cowboy, too."

(Continued from page 72)

he knew that Burke Cowley had seen the trap he had fallen into.

Sheriff Whiteside's voice cut in.

"Hold it, Cowley. Why—the kid ain't wearin' a gun!"

Tim heard Cowley curse, and Whiteside speak again, his voice now hard.

"Cowley—you're under arrest!"

Dimly, Tim saw Cowley whirl to face the sheriff, raising his gun to cover the new threat. Tim also saw Lon Whiteside's gun-hand stab and come up filled, and leap with flame as the one man in Prairie City with gunspeed to beat Cowley's fired in that split-second before Cowley could take a second aim. He saw Cowley's shape go down under the table legs.

Then, his mission done, Tim smiled faintly, and passed into the temporary peace of unconsciousness.

NOLATCH-STRING FOR A LOBO

(Continued from page 78)

released it. The clatter of its striking the floor sounded dully against his ears. Then the red wave lifted like a fog and he saw Carson on the floor before him, his gun hanging loosely in outstretched fingers.

Silver gripped his aching shoulder and retrieved his gun, battling the cloud which threatened to engulf him. Then he turned and made his way toward the back doorway where Ed stood with the boy. The boy was shaking violently when Silver grasped his arm and pushed him ahead of him through the door.

Silver clenched his teeth as they mounted and rode away. *He knows I ain't yellow*, Silver told himself over and over to distract the pain of his throbbing wound, he's proud of his old man now. Once outside of town, Silver halted to bandage his shoulder. The boy sat silently on his pony, his face showing blank and stunned in the moonlight.

"What's wrong now?" Silver asked a little sharply, when the boy suddenly began to sob.

"I'm afraid of you," Tom answered in a high muffled voice. "Please let me go home."

The kid's scared to death, Silver realized with a start. He ain't proud of me, just scared to death. He pulled the bandage tight and remounted. He eyed the north trail for a long moment, then with a sigh pointed the horses toward the Golden Swan.

They rode in silence like the strangers they were. Silver's emotions were mixed.

Ed was still at the door when they pulled up. "I brought him back, Ed," Silver said weakly, fighting to remain upright on his horse. "Take him home."

The bartender wiped his shiny head thoughtfully. "Maybe you ain't a tin-horn at that, Silver."

"Maybe," Silver replied, kneeling his mount. "Maybe." He swung down the trail to the north without once looking back. The night air was cool and refreshing and his head began to clear. Long before the red-plated dawn began to show on the horizon, Silver knew that everything had turned out right.

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(Continued from page 6)

found it plumb tiresome to while away the time with one-sided conversations to a horse. So, right naturally, he began to sing . . . and to make up tunes.

He sang of the frontier and the prairies, of rootin' tootin' shooters like Jesse James and Sam Bass, of mining and hoe-downs, jamborees and shindigs, of the Grange and the Blue Tail Fly, of the Ozarks and Red River Valley, Laredo and Cheyenne. From the back hills to the Pacific, people began picking out the tunes on their guitars and banjos. Gradually, musicians like the ones we'll be mentioning below began recording them—and you folks began listening to them on your radios and spinning them on your record players.

Then came the war—and people started traveling, soldiers and workers. They heard these sincere songs that many hadn't even been aware of. And what had belonged to only a limited number of people began to catch on.

Now everybody's singing these natural tunes—it's like a stampede. Tenderfeet, dudes, city slickers, all are climbing on the bandwagon along with the hill and Western folk who already knew this music. Yep, the whole country's humming these hardy classics, now. Big-time singers like Bing Crosby and Vaughn Monroe and others are making their own versions of these songs, and from time to time I'll be mentioning examples.

Linked up with this interest in the music of the people is the national craze for square dancing. From coast to coast, everybody's swinging their partner and circling around. Over in Santa Monica Ballroom in California, Spade Cooley, for example, has regular scheduled dances that you tophands in the vicinity probably enjoy attending. Below I'll mention a new album of his.

The "Grand Ole Opry," site of many

RECORD WRANGLING

an evening of frolicsome fiddlin' and do-si-do'ing, may be getting new headquarters. For many years, as you know, it's been in the Ryman Auditorium, but chances are within the next two years it'll be getting a brand new auditorium since the Nashville City Council just recently passed a \$5,000,000 bond issue for construction purposes.

HAIR-RAISIN' STUNT

I'm a-wondering if any of you pards wrote into Cowboy Charlie St. John, of KCNC, Fort Worth—when he ran his card-raising campaign. He threatened not to shave at all until a thousand listeners wrote in. And then he said he'd walk down the street, wearing a barrel and red flannels. That's a sight that not many folks would have like to miss.

SQUARE DANCES

by Spade Cooley and his band (RCA Victor)

The King of Western Swing has some fine, furious fiddling on these tried-and-true favorites. The selections include: FLOP-EARED MULE and WAGONER; WAKE UP SUSAN and THE EIGHTH OF JANUARY; 6/8 TO THE BARN and IDA RED—and Spade Cooley's sizzling violin plays these country classics to a fare-thee-well. As you all know, Spade Cooley's Western band is one of the most popular for sock hoe-down performance, and these rip-snortin' dance discs are sure to swell the number of his fans.

By the way, dancing isn't the only thing versatile Spade Cooley does. He recently bought a 42-foot boat and will be spending his lazy days afloat.

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by Roy Rogers and Cooley's Buckle Busters
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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

Here's another square dance package, this time by the King of Horse Opera, Roy Rogers. The cowboy movie star has a loud and clear version of one of the most popular dances, the CHASE THAT RABBIT. You'll find that both these sides have top-notch calling.

THE PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE GETTYSBURG ADDRESS

by Tex Ritter (Capitol)

Tex Ritter has tried something new in cuttings. His latest record is one in which he recites THE PLEDGE very patriotically and very well, indeed. There's a warm choral background to highlight this performance. When you turn over the platter, of this very special release, you hear Tex Ritter's refreshingly American speech reciting Abraham Lincoln's famous classic. It's a real pleasant change to hear an 'honest-to-goodness, home-styled, genuine approach to this wonderful speech of Lincoln's, instead of the very fancy kind of talking that usually brow-beats Old Abe's grass-roots appeal into meaning much less than it really does. I'm sure you'll find both the first side and THE GETTYSBURG ADDRESS different from the usual records.

By the way, did any of you get to see Tex back in September when he headlined the Michigan State Fair rodeo show?

SLIPPING AROUND MY TENNESSEE BABY

by Ernest Tubb (Decca)

That favorite of favorites, Ernest Tubb does a straight-from-the-heart job on SLIPPING AROUND, and it really should go places in a big way. It's a top-notch job from a top-notch singer.

On the flipover, rough, jaunty Tubb teaches his TENNESSEE BABY all about Texas lovin'. "I'm just a Texas guy," he warbles, "but I could love you, baby, under any old sky."

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